THE POETRY OF THE NUMINOUS

A STUDY OF IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF URSULA BETHELL

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

IN THE

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

BY

MARGARET W. HILLOCK

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

1981

ABSTRACT

In this study of the use of imagery in the work of Ursula Bethell, I have set out to examine the two aspects of her poetry: the visual and the visionary. Both of these aspects play a vital role in her exploration of metaphysical themes of Man's existence and his relationship to Nature. Miss Bethell drew her imagery from elements of Nature and I have looked at the way in which she has attempted to define Man's relationship with Nature in terms of this imagery.

CONTENTS PAGE

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the study of Ursula Bethell's poetry, one is aware of the 'two salient aspects' of her work which Basil Dowling (1) identifies as 'the visual and the visionary'. In this study I intend to show that these two aspects are complementary, and that the main body of her poetry shows her attempt to meld these two aspects into harmonious poetry with which to express her deeply religious vision and her delight in the manifestation of God's handiwork in Nature as she observed it in her garden, in the remembered landscapes of Europe, and in the Canterbury landscape (especially in the two later books) which became a source of strength and inspiration to her. Sometimes, indeed, it seems as if the inspiration came directly from Nature herself in the forms of rocks, mountains, sea and sky, while at other times, Bethell seems to have been looking at Nature to find the reflection of her own inspiration. She was aware of the two aspects of her work and selected the poems for her three books of published verse with an eye to theme and content as part of a scheme of development from the strongly visual poetry of _From a Garden in the Antipodes_ through to the sometimes profoundly metaphysical poetry of _Time and Place_ and _Day and Night_. That is not to say that these books can be seen as a chronological progression of the growth of a poet, since most of the poetry published in her lifetime was drawn from that written during the prolific years between 1924 and 1934 when she lived at 'Rise Cottage' on the Cashmere Hills with her close friend and companion, Effie Pollen.

In selecting the poems for the first book, she chose those which related to her garden and had been written and enclosed in letters to friends in England. These friends encouraged her to submit them for publication to Sidgwick and Jackson, and she collated a selection of verses in the same vein. By the time she was preparing the second volume, Time and Place which was published in 1936 by the Caxton Press, she was assured of a broader audience than she had expected for her first volume, and was confident enough to publish the more serious poems which had already begun to be published in the literary page of the Press since 1930.

The metaphysical poetry, with its themes of Man's relationship with God and with Nature was her main concern and she produced a third volume Day and Night in 1939 which was a further development of her metaphysical preoccupations. Bethell herself states in one of her rare comments on the art of poetry:

> Poetry is a music made of images
> Worded one in the similitude of another,
> Chaining the whole universe to the ecstasies
> Of humanity, its anguish and fervour. (2)

For her it was a sympathetic universe which reflected the emotions of the poet and provided images and symbols for the concepts that inspired her. An important image was that of the mountains of the Southern Alps which are seen throughout her poetry in all their moods and seasons. They were a symbol of Eternity and the agelessness of Nature and Bethell often used them as a contrast with the brevity of Man's existence both on a personal level and in the sense of Man as a species. They became a source of strength and comfort to the poet and inspired many vivid images in their turn such as those to be found in 'Levavi Oculos'. Their everchanging colours are

caught with precision by the poet who has an artist's eye for the exact colours she can see:

> And all is pavilioned with sheer celestial azure
> Hazing the far alps, their turquoise and silver; (3)

This feeling for the colours on an artist's palette is one of Bethell's strengths and one she uses to good effect both in the descriptive garden poems and in the meditative poems where colour becomes an important element in the setting of the mood in which the poet is writing. One of the most successful pieces in which colour is used to set the mood and the scene is in the first part of 'At the Lighting of the Lamps':

> The solemn, soundless music
> Of the sun's setting reverberates
> Along the low red cloud-reefs,
>
> And the last echoing reflections
> Of his great incandescence
> Diminish among the mountain-tops,
>
> As the sky's ebbing harmonies
> Die down in modulations
> Of gold and red to red-gold,
>
> Old gold, pale gold, gold-veiled
> Lingering pearl-greyness,
> Grey silence of sleep.
>
> The mountains stand round about
> Like sable-vestured chorus,
> Unlike they are swallowed up
> In the all-encompassing dark. (4)

For Bethell the sense of the universe being at one with Mankind is a pervasive mood running through her work and she relates her own contemplations on the nature of existence to the changing scenery and weather in which she lives. In reading her poetry we follow her ecstasies, her anguish and her fervour and she relates these to the universal condition of Man with the imagery of the universality of Nature. Man

cannot be separated from his place in the scheme of things and studied in isolation. Bethell does not allow us to forget that we and our concerns are merely a small and transitory part of the cosmos of God's handiwork.

Ursula Bethell's religious convictions were an essential influence on her poetry. She was a deeply religious woman who found Christianity a difficult and demanding part of her life. She once confessed to John Summers that she had always found Christianity 'unnatural' to her, and that her vision of God was harsh:

> But as she wrote "I think I have never known Him truly as love, It has been 'Maker of all things, judge of all men', in the august words of the prayer book." (5)

In her poetry we feel that Bethell is continually struggling to find the peace and resignation of the committed Christian. Committed Christian she certainly was, but the moments of serenity and acceptance which she sought were not easily arrived at and did not always sustain her in moments of greatest anguish and pain. The self-discipline that is apparent in her best work is apparent too in the way she devoted a day of each week to meditation and prayer, as well as daily prayer. In her younger years she had been vigorously involved in social work amongst the poor of London during the first World War for example, and she had always been interested in involving women in the life of the church, being instrumental in setting up St. Faith's as a contemplative house for women in Christchurch. In her later years she kept up a lively interest in the lives of the young people she came into contact with, both in their writing and in their religious life. In view of this deep interest in the well-being of people it

has always seemed strange to me that her poetry concerns itself so much with unpeopled landscapes, and that the occasional figures to be found are usually generalised so as to become part of the scenery of her meditations, rather than objects of interest in their own terms. John Summers also talks of her surprise at finding an interest in Truth and Beauty in those she had supposed to lack the education for such interest. As one reviewer has remarked in a review of Day and Night (6), her poetry is 'not for the multitude.' This 'Poetry for the Elect' as the same reviewer called it, chose themes which would be of interest to those who meditated upon philosophical and theosophical questions as Bethell herself did.

So who was Ursula Bethell writing her poetry for? The Garden poems were written from the viewpoint of an English ex-patriot in New Zealand writing home to her friends and relations describing her garden and its setting. D'Arcy Cresswell wrote that:

> New Zealand wasn't truly discovered, in fact, until Ursula Bethell, 'very earnestly digging,' raised her head to look at the mountains. (7)

In fact, the first book of poetry has very little to do with the Canterbury landscape which was later to become so important to the setting of the two following books. In this first book of verse she was much more concerned with her garden on the Port Hills and the inhabitants of this little oasis in the wild and rugged antipodean landscape. The distant views of mountains, hills or sea which occasionally intrude upon the world of her garden do not specifically seem to belong to a New Zealand landscape. The audience for her first book was

English in the main, it was published by an English firm and she had been persuaded into print by English friends and relatives. Themes of homesickness and establishing a foothold on her new surroundings emphasise the distance she feels from those things which are most important to her. It is not until the second book, Time and Place, that we begin to feel that she has journeyed beyond the garden and has learned to know and love the Canterbury landscape with its rocks, hills, mountains, and plains. It is in this book, too, that her metaphysical meditations have found a voice that was only hinted at in the first book. The audience for this second book, and the third which followed in 1939, can be found in the fact that she was now published by a New Zealand publishing house, Caxton Press, and that she had had some of the poems which were later collated for print in the literary page of the Press. Her New Zealand audience was now as important to her as her English one had been.

Nevertheless, her audience was expected to be well-educated and interested in theology enough to be able to understand the sometimes technical and archaic words which she used in her poetry. This use of 'difficult' words has sometimes proved a stumbling block to wider acceptance of her work, and has occasionally led her astray in her attempts to use diction not readily assimilated into a poetic mode. It would be true to say also that the quality of Bethell's poetry is not of a uniformly high standard and that she has included among her published poetry some verse which is obscure, or dull, or overwrought in imagery and poetic thought. Her reply to a criticism by D'Arcy Cresswell of 'Waves', a poem later included in Day and Night, is interesting for its

defense of her ideas of what could be included in poetry:

> Your rejection of this one surprises me since The Long Harbour is acceptable to you - You say that it is neither prose nor verse - but surely the rhythm is as much measured as in the other? I wonder whether you would be less severe about the subject if you were friend with the biological interpretation of the planet. 'All realities will sing' says Coventry Patmore - the biological view is very vivid to me and materially real - if one use [sic] such an expression. I feel rather obstinate about this piece because it has been submitted to my court of appeal in London & approved! He's quite a fastidious lover of english letters & disliker of modernist verse - & his brother, a theologian, gave his imprimatur to the theological waves! of, well - - (8)

While it may not be quite true that 'all realities will sing', her defense of the inclusion of the technical words to be found in 'Waves' and in several of her other poems is admirable, for words like 'entelechy' and 'phytoplankton' are not to be found in the vocabulary of many.

Ursula Bethell's work must now be judged in terms of her achievement as a New Zealand poet whose view of the New Zealand landscape influenced the younger poets who followed her lead. Certainly, if we compare her to Gerard Manley Hopkins, we must admit that she lacks his imagination in imagery and the lightness of touch to match his descriptions of 'silk-sack clouds', for example. However, her poetry of the Canterbury landscape which taught acceptance of a native landscape and turned our poets away from looking at New Zealand features from the point of view of colonists, has been an important factor in the development of an indigenous poetry. I feel that a study of her uses of imagery and the inspiration she drew from the natural features of the landscape in which she settled will provide a key to a closer understanding of her work and her achievement.

To this end I have devoted a chapter to each of the books of verse that she collated for publication herself, and a chapter on the collected poems that was published in 1950, and edited by her close friend, Dr. Helen Simpson. In the chapter on From a Garden in the Antipodes, I shall examine the visual imagery that she has used to portray her garden on the hills, and her tentative glances at the countryside that she could see from her cottage. I will examine also the beginnings of her metaphysical poetry which is hinted at in the volume. In chapter two, I shall look at Time and Place for its metaphysical theme, and the use of imagery developed in the Garden poems and extended here to her philosophical poems. Chapter three, on Day and Night, will deal with the growing mysticism in these visionary poems which deal with the themes of death and resurrection. The chapter on the Collected Poems will look briefly at the miscellaneous poems which were put together with the fragments from 'By the River Ashley' and the Six Memorials. I shall look particularly at the memorial poems for their use of the imagery of death, and the development of the theme of death because it was something which had always been an important subject in her poetry, but after the death of Miss Pollen Ursula Bethell reveals her anguish in her poetry as she searched for understanding of God's purpose in death and in life.

'The Poetry of the Numinous' is a title suggested by one of Miss Bethell's poems which talks of the numinous quality of the mountains, one of her favourite symbols. Written as early as '14th August, 1930', it is included among the 'Other Poems' in the Collected Poems. Her use of images in this poem with its metaphysical thought at the end of the poem

drawn out of the visual imagery which procedes it:

> Pensive, I apprehend the unending pageant
> Set forth before my waking eyes this tender morning,
> Veil upon veil of ocean-whispered vapour
> Driven slowly westwards by the sea-sprung east wind.
>
> Softly the drifts of mist-grey into lilac,
> To purple turn, to umber, shell-rose and vermilion,
> Passing on the sea-breeze slowly and dissolving
> Into the periwinkle dome of noble daybreak.
>
> And, breasting eagerly the sea-fresh current,
> Seawards beat three birds, with urgent flutterings,
> Lost now in wreathing dusk, and now emerging,
> Till, bare-discerned black specks, far haze receives them.
>
> The mountains stand fast in their ranks, numinous,
> Imperial calm in white snow, lordly sun-gilt,
> Stand fast over against the sea, and north, and westwards,
> Eminent from steel-blue shadow, shining splendid;
>
> But the impermanent clouds drift, drift to dissolution,
> And the black, fluttering birds, so sharply there, now are
> Even so we, athwart insentient largeness,
> We flutter eager, a few moments, and then are not.

This poem combines many of the elements which seem to me to be characteristic of Ursula Bethell's work with its careful use of colour imagery, and the use of the symbols of sea, sea-birds, mountains and clouds from which she draws her final image of Man as transient sea-bird. I have attempted to show that Ursula Bethell's work, where it is successful, draws upon the inspiration and emotions aroused in her by the natural elements around her and distils these feelings into a meta-physical thought which has grown naturally from her meditation upon the landscape.

I have been fortunate to have access to those papers of Miss Bethell which have been lodged in the James Hight Library at the University of Canterbury, and I would like to thank the staff of the Reference section for their help. I would also like to thank the Interloan department for the access to the theses of Joyce Morton and Phyllis French, and also Dr. John Weir for his kind permission to read his Phd. thesis.

CHAPTER II

FROM A GARDEN IN THE ANTIPODES

Many of the poems in the collection From a Garden in the Antipodes had been written to introduce the garden on the Cashmere Hills where Ursula Bethell had settled in 1924 with her companion Effie Pollen. The recipients of these poems had been charmed by their freshness and encouraged her to submit them to Sidgwick and Jackson who accepted them for print and brought the collection out in 1929. Miss Bethell was more than a gardener-poet, who wrote sentimental verses about her garden and her cat. In these poems one is aware that often there is a great deal of philosophical thought behind what seems to be a simple poem in praise of a view from the poet's garden towards the hills. Her avowed ambition to celebrate more than the 'pleasures of her occupation' is to be found in the modest 'Foreword' which combines the interests of the gardener and the thinker:

> I have told you, Ruth, in plain words,
> The pleasures of my occupation
> In the rhythms of the stout spade,
> The lawn-mower and the constant hoe.
> But when I listen sometimes to these persistent winds
> Moaning remotely among the resonant bluegums,
> Tossing their dark boughs towards this sheer sky --
>
> I would that it had been given me
> To be the maker of a small melody
> Fit to be chanted by one of Eve's daughters
> Throwing her first seed into a rough furrow
> Or resting in the shadow of a sycamore
> Playing upon an uncouth instrument.

Already she establishes a relationship between the 'visual and the visionary' aspects of her work which continues to be an important feature of her work. She recognises herself the interdependence between her observation of Nature and the

meditations upon her place in the scheme of things. As in this poem, her visionary thoughts are inspired by the experience of Nature. In this case, it is the sound of the wind in the bluegums which triggers the ideas of an existence beyond her garden. By the time she settled on the hills above Christchurch in 1924, Ursula Bethell was well-travelled and well-educated, and the memories of 'a loved and lost London', among others, triggered a restless wish to return to the places she had known and loved. D'Arcy Cresswell, in a collection of personal memories published in Landfall in 1948, declares that:

> New Zealand wasn't truly discovered, in fact, until
> Ursula Bethell,' very earnestly digging,' raised
> Her head to look at the mountains.

However, this first book of poems does not in fact concern itself much with the features of the Canterbury landscape which were to become so much more important in the later books. The scenery is generally confined to the garden itself, while the occasional glances beyond talk of the mountains in a general way without close definition as the Southern Alps. Ursula Bethell is yet the English ex-patriot trying to establish a foothold in her new surroundings:

> Oh, become established quickly, quickly, garden!
> For I am fugitive, I am very fugitive --- (1)

The garden is a source of pleasant occupation and for inspiration, and the poet writes of both.

Miss Bethell has collated her poems carefully and ordered them to introduce the reader to her demesne. The 'Foreword' introduces us to the poet and her occupations and her musings, so that we have an idea of the poet and her concerns. 'Response' places the poet in her antipodean clime and remarks upon the

differences between the seasons and their timing and those of her correspondent. It also introduces the themes which are very important to this collection, the theme of the transience of Man, and that of memory and its uses. The third poem is 'Pause', which is generally recognised as one of her best poems for its delicacy of touch as it speaks of the relationship of the poet with her garden, of a glimpse of the world beyond her garden, and the realisation which haunts Bethell of the perpetuity of Nature while the 'small fond human enclosures' pass away in time. The poems which follow introduce us to the denizens of the house and the garden such as the 'Raven', Michael the cat, little Omi-Kin-Kan the japanese orange tree, and various shrubs and plants she has planted with such care. Nor does she leave out the difficulties and temptations which face the dedicated gardener, while she shares her fear for the safety of a treasured plant in the ferocity of a storm. The unfamiliarity of the seasons and their relationship with the calendar months and religious festivals inspires a poem such as 'Dirge', where Easter in Autumn in New Zealand is seen as a time of sacrificial cleaning up, yet the spring Easter of her correspondent is also noted. The poet is a keen gardener, but a philosopher too, and these personal little verses are a celebration of her garden seasoned with minor crises which elicit a wry humour from the poet which rescues her work from any tendency toward sentimentality. Her poetry is sensitive and visual, and uses imagery of colour, form and music with a rhythm which finds its echo in the forms of the verse she uses so well when they come close to the conversational tone of the subject. The quality of the scene painting which is such a feature of many poems here comes from Bethell's use of vivid descriptive images which she applies with the careful dexterity

of a trained artist with a keen observation of her surroundings. In 'Verdure', for example, we have the particularity of the names of the various shades of green gems and trees used to illustrate the variety of shades of green to be found in the garden:

> But for the gem-green setting of this florid jewellery,
> Green of jade, emerald, aquamarine, chrysoberyl,
> But for the intermediate lawns and plotted plain green spaces,
> The soft greensward springing night and day continuously,
> Leafage of lemon myrtle, rosemary and mimosa,
> Cypress-green shades of the high macrocarpa hedges,
> And the tall boundary trees' bronze and viridian boughs --

The mind's eye is delighted with the colour sense of this piece and the pattern of colour and form that she has worked into the description of the scene. The same careful attention to detail can also be found in the rich colours of 'Glory' to which is added a sense of movement in a dramatic evening scene:

> Beyond the blood-red rose-engarrisoned footpath,
> And the dun green flatlands where a few human lights glimmered,
> Wild indigo and magenta rainstorms invested
> The dark recesses of the mountain ranges.
>
> Clouds overhead burst into cornelian flames,
> Transmuting by their strange glow all the garden pigments.
> Then was revealed, in a dim turquoise interstice,
> A very young, remote, and slender, but outshining,
> But all predominant moon.

Despite the slight awkwardness of the repetition of 'but' in the last two lines, the rhythm of these two stanzas conveys the movement of the clouds and the surprise appearance of the moon. The drama and richness of these two stanzas are indicative of the strong visual sense with which Ursula Bethell expresses her impressions and her responses. This perception which enables her to paint such evocative verbal landscapes also enables her to develop a philosophical observation on the

condition of Man which has been inspired by her contemplation of Nature. Thus, Bethell selects a readily recognisable image which she then elaborates and enriches by appealing to the senses, particularly here to the visual sense with a composition of colour, form and music in rhythm, imagery and verbal dexterity. There is, for example, the image she uses in 'Bulbs' as she describes the lilies she grows:

> The heart-piercing fragrance, the newly alighted angel's
> Lineal poise, and purity, and peace --

The sense of smell has been appealed to here with 'heart-piercing fragrance', which also carries the connotations of sharpness, pain and intensity of feeling and response to beauty. The allusion to form in 'the newly alighted angel's / Linear poise . . .' catches the brevity of the moment and echoes 'purity' and 'peace' in the imagery of the angel as something not only perfectly beautiful, but embodying the heavenly blessings that angels bring to Mankind. This heavenly allusion is also re-echoed in the fourth stanza with references to the Holy Land and to Paradise. The lilies have a significance for the poet beyond the space they occupy in her garden and it is their colour, form and perfume which inspire the reveries that cross her mind as she contemplates them.

Miss Bethell is able to use poetic techniques to enhance an image as she does in the delicate image of the 'minute bird' as a danger in 'Incident'. The sense of movement in these lines is expressed with alliterative words which have the rhythm of the bird's flitting movement, while the sounds of 't' and 'd' imitate the jerky dancing of the bird:

> Scenting the showers, there came a minute bird
> (Our Michael being occupied elsewhere),
> Fluttered and danced among the gracious drops,
> Flirted his wings, and frisked his little tail,
> Darted bright glances from his nodding head.

She had the ability to find the 'mot juste' in her imagery and this is a strength that sometimes rescues poems which are overwrought with imagery inappropriate to the subject. The sensual imagery is very strong in Bethell's work and it is a strength which gains in realisation that it leads beyond the mere five senses to stir the mind and emotions of the reader and the poet. When the poet is writing on philosophical matters, her visual setting reflects the mood of her meditations, as in 'Meridian':

> Summer has won at last.
> Thin lines of snow recede on the high ridges;
> The plains are spread out brown under a blue haze;
> My pinched zinnias rejoice with the marigolds and verbenas,
> They burst out into the colours of a rich eastern carpet;
> And Michael sleeps deeply under pinus insignis in cool shade

This mode of selecting a sympathetic landscape to mirror her meditations was something she developed to a greater extent in the following two books.

In these poems she is balancing the visionary ideas with visual images which translated the abstract into something tangible, especially when she considered the brevity of Man's existence and the transience of his impositions upon Nature against the back-drop of the perpetuity of the hills. Even her garden is temporary because it imposes upon Nature:

> 'Established' is a good word, much used in garden books,
> 'The plant, when established' . . .
> Oh, become established quickly, quickly, garden!
> For I am fugitive, I am very fugitive --
>
> Those that come after me will gather these roses,
> And watch, as I do now, the white wistaria
> Burst, in the sunshine, from its pale green sheath.

Planned. Planted. Established. Then neglected,
Till at last the loiterer by the gate will wonder
At the old, old cottage, the old wooden cottage,
And say 'One might build here, the view is glorious;
This must have been a pretty garden once.' ('Time')

The use of the image 'fugitive' with the repeated 'quickly' accentuate a tempo which expresses the impermanence of Man's influence on Nature. The second stanza is slower and deals with the neglected garden, comparing eternal Nature with the brevity of her own life. The third stanza contrasts the 'old, old cottage' with the neglected garden, when the buildings of Man have decayed and Nature has reclaimed the neat manicurings of a manmade garden. These images are saved from banality by Bethell's phrasing in line 10 with the repetition and development of the second phrase, lifting the image beyond the commonplace. This second look at an image is a strength of this poet's which is used to stress a concept she wishes to imbue with fresh meaning, and usually this is done with effective visual imagery.

Her own awareness of the effectiveness of sensual imagery as illustration of her themes is seen in 'Names':

Solitary, after all, were the gardener,
But for the accompaniment of words.

In this matutinal seclusion
Sights, sounds, and scents, all, all agree to please.
Comely the smile of all well-natured subjects,
Goodly the smell of wholesome upturned soil.
Lovely above all is this silence --
But the silence is vibrant with words!

They murmur in the distance like bees,
They whisper in the rustle of the trees,
Then springs one, instant to be heard,
Sings on my shoulder like a bird.

The poet is open to all the stimuli to be found in the garden and able to use them all in her work, as she does in her contemplation of her garden when Ursula Bethell is at the same

time speaking to all gardeners in an idiom with which they can readily identify. She then leads them from the known and seen to the abstractions of philosophy and contemplates the transience of Man and the continuity of Nature. The best poem of the set is 'Pause' in which she combines the concrete world with the abstract in an interdependence which is mutually rewarding:

> When I am very earnestly digging
> I lift my head sometimes, and look at the mountains,
> And muse upon them, muscles relaxing.
>
> I think how freely the wild grasses flower there,
> How grandly the storm-shaped trees are massed in their gorges
> And the rain-worn rocks strewn in magnificent heaps.
>
> Pioneer plants on those uplands find their own footing;
> No vigorous growth, there, is an evil weed:
> All weathers are salutary.
>
> It is only a little while since this hillside
> Lay untrammelled likewise,
> Unceasingly swept by transmarine winds.
>
> In a very little while, it may be,
> When our impulsive limbs and our superior skulls
> Have to the soil restored several ounces of fertiliser,
>
> The Mother of all will take charge again,
> And soon wipe away with her elements
> Our small fond human enclosures.

As in 'Time', the concept is of Nature reclaiming her own when Man has passed away from his small influences. There is a quality of vision coupled with a hint of self-irony which is evident here, with a genuine quality of poetic thought and image to be found. In this, and other poems of this quality in the collection, there is a strength of mind and purpose which has influenced the main-stream of New Zealand poetry with its honesty and its clear-eyed look at the difficulties of belief. This strength and purpose, with her strong religious belief, found expression in her gardening and poetry which are

complementary as she seeks to express:

> The pleasures of my occupation
> In the rhythms of the stout spade,
> The lawn-mower and the constant hoe . . . ('Foreword')

She earned for herself the realisation of her wish:

> I would that it had been given me
> To be the maker of a small melody
> Fit to be chanted by one of Eve's daughters . . . (ibid)

The Horticulturist of 'Sinensis' is, indeed, 'labouring in physical toil' and Bethell's labours are often presented in a conversational manner spiced with a wry humour which delights us and rescues the poem from 'the experience of dulness' (2).

'Dulness' is a major difficulty in this volume of verse and is criticised by D'Arcy Cresswell (3):

> Miss Hayes writes in one piece 'My garage is a structure of excessive plainness,' and of some of her pieces the same might be said. She should, in future, remember that not all is of interest, even in verse. And when she declares 'But the Horticulturist is deprived of the experience of dulness,' we would politely murmur that the public is not.

There are poems in this collection which are devoid of any attempt at imaginative transformation from the mundane and banal. 'Grace' and 'Detail', are perhaps the most prosaic pieces, but there are others which depend solely on the turning of the last line or two in humour or irony for any saving interest at all, as we find it in 'Gradient' and 'Discipline'.

There is a charm in her more prosaic and down-to-earth poems which are leavened with a wry smile at her own preoccupation with the garden as we see in 'Discipline' and 'Perspective'. Then there are those poems which seem to have

no deeper meaning other than their superficial one. 'Gradient', 'Ruth H.T.' and 'Grace' are prosaic in expression and simple in content with uncomplicated imagery such as the tentative personification to be found in:

> At midnight a fierce storm from the South Pole assails us;
> Wooden house quivers, chimneys roar, windows rattle,
> Hailstones clatter on glass panes and iron roof,
> Deep in our warm beds we lie awake shuddering . . .('Gale,S.S.W

This straightforward simplicity must then be compared with the complexity of images which tumble one upon another in 'Homage', 'Primavera' and 'Fuchsias'. These poems are 'prodigious' in evocative images. The colour combinations in 'Fucshias' call to mind the spectrum of women's costumes in a delicate fashion parade and then return in the final stanza to the reality of their position 'by the south wall' as they welcome visitors. The fourth stanza of 'Homage' suggests a chaotic tumble of roses in the cascade of images that Bethell conjures up for us. The universality of roses historically and geographically is to be found here as well as the way that roses are known and loved by everyone from queens to coster-mongers, from tender babe to sage. This is imparted in a richness of imagery and allusion. Yet there is here an over-abundance of allusion which in its very comprehensiveness overstates the case for roses and stretches the reader's imagination to the point where their beauty and significance have been lost. The third stanza claims:

> . . . When one speaks the word roses, roses,
> All their beauty and significance is spoken too.

Yet in the following stanza she contradicts herself with the abundance of ideas and allusions which jostle for the reader's

attention. There is a sense here that the images are enjoyed by the poet for their own cleverness rather than for their fulfilment of the poetic thought about roses where Bethell began. Again, in 'Primavera' there are images which put too heavy a burden upon the subject matter of primroses and the homesickness they arouse in the poet as she views them:

> Beyond the sprinkled nebulae of the faint starry way,
> Like your own starry clusters in the dusk of a clear day,
> Far beyond dim avenues of planetary space,
> The clue to your sweet look is hid in a celestial place.
>
> And who but you should trim the brink of Supernal Beauty's spring?
> Whose souls but yours adorn the groves where immortal choirs sing?

The simplicity of the humble primrose is quite lost in this overlong, overwrought image of heavenly beauty. The preoccupation with images and sounds of words for their own sake sometimes leads to carelessness: 'the sea-coasts of Bohemia' (4). The cleverness of her images and the sonority that Bethell so obviously enjoys are sometimes too seductive and lead her away from the true poetic theme of her work. This is a weakness indulged in several poems in this volume, and it leads to the complicated and overwrought imagery instanced above. It is unfortunate, perhaps, that 'Primavera' ends in the ornate fashion that it does because the first stanza has an elegant simplicity:

> I must pass you by, primroses, I must pass you by
> When I boast of the fair flowers translated to please our eye, --
> The sight of you under the apple-tree has too sweet a sting,
> So like, so unlike the sight of you in an English orchard in spring.

The use of rhyme is simple and fitting with no sense of strain in a metre which echoes the conversational tone Bethell uses well.

The language is plain, fitting the simple subject but not yet detracting from the depth of poetic feeling that the poet is expressing in homely, yet poignant images which are inter-related in their theme of 'translation' from England to 'here' and it is strengthened by the parallels of the 'apple-tree' and 'an English orchard'. The sense of sight is the important faculty here but the sensations of taste and pain are also described as part of the poet's experience. The simplicity and sincerity of the poet's feelings at this point are perfectly expressed, but she then elevates ideas of the beauty of the primroses and their 'translation' to the colonies with complex 'poetic' images which end in a gush of emotion in the final stanzas as quoted above. The breathlessness of this 'celestial' imagery is an uncommon fault in Bethell, though instances of imagery over-wrought to the stage where it leaves the object of the poem behind in a flurry of extended and ornate metaphor such as that found in 'Old Master':

> Or picture, here, some Conversazione
> With flowers, birds, grass, and purple hills beyond,
> And gilding sunlight, eloquent chiaroscuro,
> And noble forms augustly grouped, and still ---
> Smiling and still. Initiate and aware.
>
> And thronging on the outskirts, in the foreground,
> You, and you, and you, beloved familiars,
> Bearing your individual sign and coat of arms,
> Surprised and still, smiling and yet expectant ---
> Found. Known. Secure. And reconciled.

Again, in 'Homage', the hail of images crowd in on each other:

> Roses of Persia, Roses of Damascus;
> Roses held up for sale in Piccadilly Circus;
> Roses for queen's bedchambers, and the costermongers'
> holiday;
> Roses for the tender babe's first apprehensions;
> And for the sage's mystic contemplations;
> Roses for marriage pomps, and the dear maid's untimely bier;

> Roses for fame, pride, joy, romance,
> Rapture, remembrance, solace in sore pain;
> Symbols of secrecy, truth, love, holiness;
> Roses on the green graves of our mortality,
> Roses by the green walks of the New Jerusalem --

In 'Bulbs' and 'Catalogue', we are stunned by a welter of technical names which do not convey to the reader without botanical knowledge anything of the form or colour of these plants. In 'Catalogue' reference is made to 'lovely-sounding names' and this appears to be the sole motivation for the poem, but Bethell's readers, who are not always the educated gardener that she was, are lost and confused by her fondness for words. Their unfamiliarity causes the reader to stumble and reread, so that the rhythm is lost:

> Lilium Chalcedonicum, Calla Aethiopica,
> Lilium auratum, candidum, the martagon,
> Lilium speciosum, pardalinum, umbellatum,
> Amaryllis, convalleria, nerine. ('Bulbs')

> Adenandra uniflora, Aloysia Citriodora,
> Iochroma Tubulosa, Podalyria Grandiflora,
> Melaleuca, Santolina, Lasiandra,
> Cantua, Cassia, Felecia, Luculia,
> Daphne . . . ('Catalogue')

The unfamiliar Latin names distance the reader from the image the poet is striving for and we lose both the visual imagery and the visionary thought behind the poem.

Miss Bethell's strongest poems in this collection are those in which she uses visual imagery carefully with an artist's eye and a musician's ear to enrich the visionary thought, but at the same time controls it so that it does not overwhelm the subject matter; then, she writes well and has something important to share with the reader. Her imagery fires the imagination and is skilfully enought done to suggest a strong visual picture in the mind. It is for the visual

imagery of colour and line that Ursula Bethell is remembered in From a Garden in the Antipodes. There is a sensibility in this visual aspect of her work which gives it a lasting and universal quality often using form, line and colour in a vivid and exciting manner and appealing to experiences common to reader and poet. She has not yet mastered the visionary aspect which dominated her later work and at times became self-indulgent. Taking an overall view of Ursula Bethell's first volume of verse I find that the quality of the poetry and the effectiveness of the imagery is inconsistent. There are some very fine poems where she has used rich and evocative images sensitively and imaginatively to express the inspiration which moved her to write. There are other poems where the imagery has been indulged and allowed to overwhelm the motivational poetic thought and these are poems where Miss Bethell has been seduced by the sounds of words to the extent that she composed clever images for their own sake without regard to the burden they placed upon the theme of the poem. Among the more prosaic poems there are those which fitted D'Arcy Cresswell's description 'dull', and there are those which have a charm that comes from their simplicity, their obvious sincerity and their wry humour as seen in 'Ruth, H.T.'and 'Citrus'.

'Ruth' is my very fine new rose-tree.
'Compact in growth' is she, and 'fairly vigorous';
Her leaves so 'dark and shiny, will not mildew.'
'Erect' she carries 'large round blooms of copper-carmine.'
'Continuous' these blooms, and 'sweetly scented.'

Around her base spring many-coloured tulips;
Beside her leans an orange crimson-spotted lily;
Beneath her smiles a small bright apricot-hued viola.

> -- So to my faith, and for your fancy. But the facts are:
> Two bare thorny twigs with a pink label;
> Stuck in the earth around them several white pegs!

Not great poetry perhaps, but with an appeal in the ironic ending.

The relationship here between the visual and the visionary is one in which the visual inspires the contemplation, as we see in 'Pause', for example where the poem looks up from her gardening and muses upon the mountains:

> When I am very earnestly digging
> I lift my head sometimes, and look at the mountains,
> And muse upon them, muscles relaxing.

The meditation then follows this in a logical progression from the plants and how they survive in those uplands to the passing away of Man, and Nature taking over again. There is a simple grace and strength to this poem which comes from the straightforward images leading to an uncomplicated and obvious metaphysical thought. This is a successful meld of the visual and the visionary where the visionary idea develops logically from the visual imagery. Successful poems in this book are also to be found in those which depend upon simple visual imagery of colour, music and rhythm without abstruse metaphysical thought imposed upon them. Bethell is successful, too, in those poems where the thought has given rise to the imagery which illustrates it as in 'Time'. In these poems there is a fine balance between the visual and the visionary aspects of her work that is memorable.

CHAPTER III

TIME AND PLACE

With the publication of Time and Place in 1936, we find a maturity and depth in Ursula Bethell's writing which is immediately obvious from the confidence of the first poem 'Willows in the Valley.' She has begun to move away from the simple visual poems which dominated From a Garden in the Antipodes, and she now writes on metaphysical themes as the visionary aspect of her work dominates here, springing as it does from her deep religious convictions. The confidence she has gained in her own writing thus enables her to assert her own vision:

> It was a vision of willows in magical young green ...
> Spring-time is vision; come, gone, imperishable;
> Spring is dim cloudland of new bliss, impenetrable;
> Spring is a sun-breathed veil on what shall be, has been,
> A bright stuff spun of the seen and the unseen.
>
> ('Willows in the Valley')

The balance between the 'seen and the unseen' has become her motivating thought and she writes and thinks of the influence that the unseen has over the seen in a universe where everything seems to be controlled by the presence of God. For Bethell, the hand of God is seen in every rock and mountain and in the changing sky and sea. Every natural image that she uses is, in James K. Baxter's words:

> The mirror and self-revelation of the Holy Spirit; this, not in an abstract sense, but in minute and concrete particulars. Hence she could look on mountain and sea coast as the intimate features of a beloved person. (1)

There had been some tentative exploration of the 'unseen' in the garden poems but in the years between their publication

in 1929, and this publication in 1936, she has here a surer touch in handling the metaphysical and this can be seen in the diction and substance of these seasonal poems. The English exile looking 'Home-ward' is now a poet settled in the country she lives in, apart from the occasional look backward to 'the far green European meadow', with memories of an English heritage to balance against the wild scenery of this young country. The eyes of the poet have lifted from the concentrated gaze on her own garden to the mountains she mused upon in 'Pause' and there is a broader and deeper interest in the countryside beyond the garden she left behind in 1934 when she moved to the city from the Cashmere Hills. This is a New Zealand poet celebrating the New Zealand countryside with a mind fully aware of the visionary possibilities to be found in the willows, mountains and hills, fields and forests she views as she travels the Canterbury plain, for this volume also seems to celebrate her ability to visit a wide variety of places beyond the confines of her own immediate environment.

Greater confidence allows her to state her philosophy of poetry in stronger terms than she had done in the Garden poems. Compare the assertion in 'Weathered Rocks' that:

> Poetry is a music made of images
> Worded one in the similitude of another,
> Chaining the whole universe to the ecstasies
> Of humanity, its anguish and fervour.

with the more tentative 'Alpines':

> Away with you, plausible rhymes, that come to me unbidden;
> I listen for little sounds that are shy and hidden:
> Away to the poet's pastures, all too mettlesome steeds;
> Halting, pausing footsteps suffice for my needs.

The 'halting, pausing footsteps' no longer suffice for her

needs. She is concerned now with 'the whole universe ... of humanity' and yet she does not confuse the kinship she feels with the 'rock, thorn, cryptogram, ... proceeding to an unknown goal;' with universality of response:

> And they are secret to themselves as I am secret to myself.
> And I think they have no part in my dole;
>
> And shall another estimate the influence
> Of mass, form, colour, on individual soul,
> Or relate my smitten heart-throb,
> Beholding these things, to cosmic diastole?
> But deep is the given peace, when informed particular
> Has respect unto the dignity of the whole.

The visionary aspect of her work in the Garden poems was drawn from a personal response to Nature as in 'Pause', or where Nature seemed to echo the poet's thoughts as in 'Time'. Here, too, she is concerned with that personal response, but now she is able to see it in respect of the whole with a broader vision of the uses of poetry and of her own part in relating the 'informed particular ... unto the dignity of the whole.' Her theme in 'Weathered Rocks' is one she returns to time and again in this book of verse: the theme of the kinship of Man and Nature in the cosmos, with a deep yearning for spiritual peace:

> Rock, thorn, cryptogram, each has significance,
> Each makes contribution to eternal parabole;
> And we are kin, compounded of the same elements,
> Alike proceeding to an unknown goal;

In a sense this is a development of Baxter's idea of the natural world as 'the mirror and self-revelation of the Holy Spirit' where Man and Nature are one in their creation by God. The imagery in the second and third stanzas is of boulders at the mercy of the elements yet surviving to give

'pittance' to a few hardy plants:

> But there shall be no equivalent
> Of these fire-wrought and water-worn boulders.
> Tattoo'd and stained, silvered, denigrated,
> Rusted and empurpled by exposure
> To ocean-salted south and east winds
> Unremittingly sweeping over these headlands;
>
> Since in the bosom of this volcano
> The fires abated, died down, and were exhausted,
> Fretted by aurelian and grey moulds,
> Encrusted with frilled lichens, pale, glaucous;
> Giving pittance to lissom tussock grasses
> And twisted brambles, from invisible crevasses.

Joyce Morton (2) speaks of the 'strangeness' and harshness, suggesting that it is outside the traditional subjects of poetry. Certainly the symbols that Bethell uses here are not often used, but the strength that is suggested by the weathering and tempering of the rocks is akin to the process which strengthens the human soul in the storms of life, and therefore appropriate to her theme of the relationship between Nature and Man. The physical and spiritual kinship between Man and Nature is a continuing theme in Time and Place. The passage of the seasons and the effect upon Nature is echoed by the effect of the passing of the spiritual seasons upon the state of Man. Time and Place belong to the natural and the physical world, but they inspire in Bethell meditations on the supernatural and the metaphysical aspects of Man's existence in Nature.

The book is structured in four seasons, with four poems in each section with the visual sense of each season expressed in appropriate and vivid imagery. Each introductory poem sets the scene both visually and spiritually. 'Willows in the Valley', the introductory poem of spring is a good example of her ability to use the imagery of light and shade in effective

musical imagery:

In a secluded valley, at a spring noontide,
New September sunlight subdued by fugitive rains,
We saw the ghosts of willow-trees waiting embodiment,
Assembled in a pasture's emerald bay.

These were not trees we saw, these were tree-spirits
In the still noonday shown us, and a waking dream;
Thoughts of young willows not imprisoned yet,
Impalpable boughs and incorporeal green.

They stood, those delicate spheres (a distillation
Of purest green and golden mist and rosy haze
Their fabric) motionless; they were poised airily,
As they had danced thither, and might dance away.

The small bird riro-riro a secret rivulet
Of song made warble there; the musical shade
Of bird-to-be, fluting in ghostly willow-wood
Happy-sad lullaby for spirits soon to wake.

Or were these phantom willows from beyond the waves
Of time's deep ocean, trees upon whose branches
Aliens hung up their harps, fair maid her garland
By fatal stream, or shading tyrant's graves?

And the small bird-trill, fluttering echo faint
Of oaten pipe that once by legendary shepherd
Was played in far green European meadow,
Telling old sylvan pleasures, pastoral complaint?

It was a vision of willows in magical young green ...
Spring-time is vision; come, gone, imperishable;
Spring is dim cloudland of new bliss, impenetrable;
Spring is a sunbreathed veil on what shall be, has been,
A bright stuff spun of the seen and the unseen.

There is a sense in this poem of the imminent beginning of life with the spirits of the 'young willows' about to take on the form of new life.

'November', which opens the Summer group of poems, is full of rich images of 'darkening', 'deeper sigh', 'grave repose' and sacrificial lambs and cattle, with the implication of harvest festival. It sets the scene of the bounty of summer, but Bethell never lets us forget the darker side of such fullness:

> The gorse is rusting; dust on wayside verdure lies;
> Hedge hawthorns heavily hang down snow festoons;
> On purple mountains steadily melt those other snows;
> Ever the noonday sky in darkening azure burns;
> The airy willows muffled now in wadded robes,
> A deeper sigh of wind resounds through denser boughs;
> Thickly the grass to leaf, to seed, to hay matures;
> The sturdy lambs have given over nursery games,
> And reverend cattle wait their hour in grave repose.
>
> Thus in young summer green-wreathed earth prepares
> Her year-long increment, and fills her wealthy stores,
> Made ready, all unwitting, for the sacrifice ....
> Thou, heart of man, thou knowest thy dear joys
> Are richly added to thee, not to clutch the prize;
> These,in due season, presently, thou offerest likewise.

The 'airy willows' are 'muffled now in wadded robes', suggesting not only the passing of the seasons, but throughout the poem there is the 'darkening' sense of sacrifice, not only of the fruits of the season but ultimately of Man himself.

'Autumn Roses' begins the autumnal score by returning to the garden and the poet's beloved roses. The spiritual 'season' is underlined by Bethell here in her remarks:

> 'What is meant to us
> By these perfect, departing roses?!
> Her reply: 'The joys
> Adorning the declension of life's afternoon, ...'

implies that we can relate the waning of the year to our own declining years. This poem about roses, although it returns to the particularity of the garden poems, does not have the concentration on visual imagery that we have seen in 'Homage' or 'Ruth H.T.'. The poet is clearly concerned here with the visionary aspect of the roses as illustrating her thoughts about the passing of a lifetime parallelled by the passing of the seasons.

The roses are again an image in the Winter sequence opening poem, 'Warning of Winter':

Give over, now, red roses;
Summer-long you told us,
Urgently unfolding, death-sweet, life-red,
Tidings of love. All's said. Give over.

The roses have already been associated with the dying year in 'Autumn Roses', and the lilies, which are also a symbol for death here, have been used to encompass all the dying flowers of winter in imagery of darkness and death:

Alas, alas to darkness
Descends the flowered pathway,
To solitary places, deserts, utter night;
To issue in what hidden dawn of light thereafter?

Bethell answers this question by remembering the cyclic quality in nature and thus completes the seasonal cycle by relating to the continuation of the seasons inspired by the continuing love of God as expressed in Agape:

But one, in dead of winter,
Divine Agape, kindles
Morning suns, new moons, lights starry trophies;
Says to the waste; Rejoice, and bring forth roses;
To the icefields: Let here spring thick bright lilies.

And so the cycle begins again.

In the organisation of her poetry into the progression of seasons, Bethell explores the perpetuity of, yet variation in, Nature as expressed in the changes to be seen in the countryside and gardens. Within each seasonal section Bethell illustrates the variation to be found in the change-ability of weather and perspective. Thus, the peace and beauty of the 'Willows in the Valley' is followed by the fury of 'Spring Storm' with its first two stanzas of violent imagery. In the second two stanzas she expresses the brevity of the spring storm with a change of pace and imagery as the beauty and light of Primavera replaces the dark Furies of the storm.

The use of pagan myth is interesting here as personification of the storm and the peace that follows. It is an example of the 'synthesis' that John Summers talks of in the Landfall memories of 1948. He understood that the synthesis for which Miss Bethell longed was that:

> religion, art and nature should become interfused: that nature should be so moulded and interpreted by art that together they might serve as a minor extension of Christianity. She looked upon nature, that is to say, with the eyes of a religious artist, ...

In Time and Place she is attempting that synthesis and she was to continue to explore the possibilities in Day and Night. 'Anniversary' follows with its strongly visual emphasis. The poet then goes on to talk of the inspiration, the 'intellectual labour' that nature awakens in her. The section ends with 'The Long Harbour' which is considered one of her best poems. In it she sustains the relationship between visual imagery and visionary poetic thought in a finely balanced poem. It is a sensitive picture of Akaroa in springtime, yet is mindful always of its historical heritage:

> ... White hawthorn hedge from old, remembered England,
> and orchard white, and whiter bridal clematis
> the bush-bequeathed, conspire to strew the valleys
> in tender spring, and blackbird, happy colonist,
> and blacker, sweeter-fluted tui echo
> either the other's song ....
>
> ... I have walked here with my love in the early spring-time,
> and under the summer-dark walnut-avenues,
> and played with the children, and waited with the aged
> by the quayside, and listened alone where manukas
> sighing, windswept, and sea-answering pine-groves
> garrison the burial ground ....

In the four poems in this section, Bethell has written of the changeability within the spring weather and scenery from the late snow and the first buds of spring through the fierce

tempest of a brief spring storm, to the fullness of a late spring/early summer day and the links between the spring season with its new beginnings to the youth of a colony which retains the memories of the older lands from whence the colonists came. Through them all runs the contrast between the burgeoning, renewing season and the shadow of inevitably passing time, as she specifies in the 'ossuary' of 'The Long Harbour'. The four poems relate to each other and complement the season not only in visual terms but in a sense of new springing life shadowed by a foreknowledge of death from which it springs, and which waits inevitably at the end of the cycle.

In each of the four sections, Bethell explores the different aspects of each season and they are linked by her interrelated themes of the inevitable passage of time with its cycle of rebirth, ripening, decay and death both of Nature and the passing of human life, from birth to death. There is an acceptance of the inevitability of death as a regulating fact of life which Bethell was still exploring in the Garden poems, but has since accepted with a greater serenity. The themes of 'Time ' and 'Place' are interwoven throughout the collection, particularly in relation to the way that time and the passing of the seasons affects the place, the environment of Man, and, by extension, Man himself. These themes link the poems not only in their seasonal context, but from one poem to the next there is a continuity of theme, interest and imagery which makes it difficult to isolate individual poems. There is a unity of interest which marries the whole collection. Each season is reflected in the changes which occur in her important images, as for example, the willows where the 'purest green and gold mist and rosy haze' of spring in

'November', and the 'spiral green and level gold' of 'Drive to North Canterbury' in summer. In autumn they become 'the various gilt willows' of 'By Burke's Pass' and 'a dark, purple willow' of 'Autumn Afternoon'. Bethell is aware that willows symbolise death, and in Time and Place, the willows are used in six poems and used in a variety of ways both as symbolic of the change of seasons, as part of the scenery as they are in 'November'. In 'Willows in the Valley', they are used to illustrate the light and colour of a newly budding spring and the idea of spirits waiting to take on a material existence. Allusions to death associated with the willows are picked up in the 'scarce-stirring willow-trees' of the graveyard of the 'The Long Harbour'. In 'Drive to North Canterbury' where the willow image is used in every stanza, Bethell interweaves the visual qualities of the willows for their colour with the thoughtful conclusion:

> Be thankful, travellers, who greet
> The tawny harvest-fields unrolled,
> That bread for body's need is given
> And likewise spiritual meat;
> For, 'tis the lustre on the gold,
> The grace wherewith in green is stoled,
> Mid solitude of misty grey,
> The careless willow by the way,
> That lure the soul from earth to heaven.

The ordering of the poems within each seasonal movement follows a progression which reflects Bethell's own movement away from the predominantly visual poems of the Garden volume. This movement can be seen in the internal ordering of each seasonal sequence. 'The Long Harbour' is a successful attempt at interweaving the visual and visionary imagery:

There are three valleys where the warm sun lingers,
gathered to a green hill girt-about anchorage,
and gently, gently, at the cobbled margin
of fire-formed, time-smoothed, ocean-moulded curvature
a spent tide fingers the graven boulders,
the black, sea-bevelled stones.

The fugitive hours, in those sun-loved valleys,
implacable hours, their golden-wheeled chariots'
inaudible passage check, and slacken
their restless teams' perpetual galloping;
and browsing, peaceable sheep and cattle
gaze as they pause by the way.

Grass springs sweet where once thick forest
gripped vales by fire and axe freed to pasturage;
but flame and blade have spared the folding gullies,
and there, still, the shade-flitting, honey-sipping lutanists
copy the dropping of tree-cool waters
dripping from stone to stone.

Here the historical allusions have become so much a part of the poet's vision of the place that they influence the word patterns in the poetry:

From far, palm-feathery, ocean-spattered islands
there rowed hither dark and daring voyagers;
and Norseman, Gaul, the Briton and the German
sailed hither singing; all these hardy venturers
they desired a home, and have taken their rest there,
and their songs are lost on the wind.

The poet's serenity and her acceptance of death impose a mood of calm upon the scene in the last two stanzas where the images of the 'grass-knoll' is imbued with the agelessness of the 'ancestresses'. The image in the last stanza is of embarking from earthly life for the shores of heaven, an image she picks up again in 'Kaikoura. Winter, 1941.' in the 'Other Poems'. Here she pictures it as an expedition and uses onomatopoeia to suggest the movement away from the shore as one sets sail. The sensual imagery pleases the ear and the rhythm echoes the preparations for embarkation. Both the sensual images and the meditational images are delicately

It should be very easy to lie down and sleep there
in that sequestered hillside ossuary,
underneath a billowy, sun-caressed grass-knoll,
beside those dauntless, tempest-braving ancestresses
who pillowed there so gladly, gnarled hands folded,
their tired, afore-translated bones.

It would not be a hard thing to wake up one morning
to the sound of bird-song in scarce-stirring willow-trees,
waves lapping, oars plashing, chains running slowly,
and faint voices calling across the harbour;
to embark at dawn, following the old fore-fathers,
to put forth at daybreak for some lovelier,
still undiscovered shore.

The other seasons follow the same pattern with Summer opening with the scene setting and sacrifice in 'November' and closing with the meditation of 'Levavi Oculos'. Winter opens with the season depicted in the dying roses of 'Warning of Winter' and closes with the 'Envoy' to the death of the year, the close of the day and the death of her companion. The Autumn group opens with 'Autumn Roses' as a symbol of the last, lingering colours of summer, and is followed by 'Showers of Leaves' with falling autumn leaves as the dying cadence of the year and of the closing of the day. 'By Burke's Pass' is the devotional poem in this group and preceded the panoramic 'Autumn Afternoon'. Both poems have the relationship between Man and his environment as their theme with discord, struggle and the transience of Man the keynote of the first, while the harmony of the harvest and the calm joy of the poet is the feature of the tone of the latter. It is a fitting conclusion to the section because it reflects more accurately the sense of peace and acceptance the poet has gained:

And coming that evening, cold evening, late evening,
  And coming to compline, dismissing the day;
And conning life's lesson, to fathom the meaning,
  The exquisite pleasures adorning the way,

New every morning, the various treasure
  Measured again, took up all my mind;
The tokens of kindness, the cup in the cornsack,
  The corn out of Egypt, the blessing assigned,

The shining surprises, the rose in the desert,
  Oh, naught but the mercy, the turning again,
Naught but remembrance of kindness and mercy
  Supplying fresh manna the soul to sustain,

New wine distilled, yea, filling the cup full,
  Secret bread, hid manna, my thoughts did employ --
And how a red sallow, and two sorts of poplar,
  Upsprung in a valley, had wrought me such joy.

('Autumn Afternoon.')

Bethell uses natural images of trees (particularly willows), hills, and mountains, and the ocean for their constancy throughout the changeability of seasons and of time. She also uses her virtuosity in the images of colour and the contrasts of light and darkness with her painterly eye for visual description and use of the painted scene in a more literal way:

The January sun had veiled
Has burning gaze of yesterday,
And his bright glances of the morn
With drooping mists, ere we had hailed
The northern hills: a curtain grey
Was hung about our rural way,
But painted on its shadowy fold
Were, spiral green and level gold,
The willow trees and fields of corn.

('Drive to North Canterbury')

She also has an ear for the music of well-chosen words:

A soft susurration of small leaves in dessication, a
                                                rustling,
  a hushed song is breathed here where the wind stirs then;
    accomplished, accomplished is their ministration,
      their service is done.

('Showers of Leaves.')

Bethell's sensual imagery makes appeals to the ears and eyes

of the reader here, as she has done successfully in the Garden poems. Although she has left the simple visual descriptive poems of the Garden poems, she continues to use the rich sensual descriptions which are the inspiration for the poet's thoughts. Her use of time as a theme has led her to examine the changing seasons in terms of the passing of a day. Thus, the spring poems use the imagery of dawn, early morning, wakening, daybreak, and noonday. Summer is noonday, late morning, and the passage of the whole day in 'Levavi Oculos'. 'The declension of life's afternoon', 'the waning sun', 'this ending day', the coming of night, the calm afternoon drawing to a close is soft falling shadows, and 'cold evening, late evening,' are the images of Autumn. 'Utter night' and its sense of death and darkness are echoed in the Winter poems.

In Time and Place, the hills and mountains have become symbols for the divine comfort as expressed in 'Levavi Oculos'. In 'Pause' in From a Garden in the Antipodes, they were seen as a source of inspiration but their symbolism is implicit, and thus more powerful in their impact than the explicit and complicated symbolism in 'Levavi Oculos'. Bethell continued to use images of mountains and hills throughout her later writing both as elements of scenery and for their brooding presence as sentinel, guardian, symbol of solace and reflecting the passage of time and season. Here she extends her poetic vision in expressions of her broader canvas as she elaborates upon ideas which she had begun to explore in the Garden poems. For example, we have seen in 'Pause' how she has lifted her head to muse upon the hills and compared the transience of Man with the timelessness of Nature. In 'Levavi Oculos' in the Summer quartet we have a more detailed expression of the solace and liberty that the sight of the hills has

brought her, but it is not necessarily more effective than the simplicity of 'Pause'. She has allowed her imagination to play upon the colours and form of the hills in the variation of light in the course of a day. They have become more than just provocation for uneasy thoughts on morality, they are a source of calm and consolation:

> The delicate lines of the hills of this country,
> Rainswept and suntanned, raked to the four winds,
> Console our tired eyes as the high-lineaged kine do,
> With their fine-chiselled flanks in a near field reclined,
> Bring solace, calm as the quiet bills are,
> Composed of the same lineaments in one design.
>
> ('Levavi Oculos.')

They have become an expression of her religious conviction strengthened through her own experience, echoing the words from Psalm 121: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills: from whence cometh my help.'

There is a comparison, too, in the treatment of the storm in 'Gale, S.S.W.' in the Garden poems with the more complicated and elaborate 'Spring Storm' of Time and Place. In 'Gale, S.S.W.', the storm is seen in terms of its effects upon the house and people:

> At midnight a fierce storm from the South Pole assails us;
> Wooden house quivers, chimneys roar, windows rattle,
> Hailstones clatter on glass panes and iron roof,
> Deep in our warm beds we lie awake shuddering.

In 'Spring Storm', she has personified the storm with the fierceness of the Furies upon the earth which is yet secure:

> All night in the darkness the Furies, the Furies
> Shrieked on the southwind and wailed in the rain;
> Inciting to tumult gales pelting sharp hail
> From mighty catapult;
> But deep in obscurity earth slept the surer.

Bethell's images in the second poem are more involved and draw upon an image from mythology, but the description is not more effective for its somewhat pretentious imagery. Though subject to more thought and working through than the earlier storm poem, the poet tends towards the trait she showed in some of the Garden poems of working at an image for its own sake.

However, elsewhere she is writing richer poems which show control of theme and imagery, as she plains in 'Anniversary':

> Time importunes our vision with such favours
> As it revolves, and may therewith devise
> A jot of quiet, the regale to savour --
> But of, that we distil from each new Spring's surprise
> Imperishable essence, intellectual labour
> Storing the elixir in mind's treasuries
> Against the ultimate hour a blinding darkness lies
> On these, by its very turning, ever time-menaced eyes.

The 'intellectual labour' is certainly evident in the poems of Time and Place, both in the scope of imagery and the exploration of the metaphysical themes of life, death and the effects of the passage of time on Man and the environment he makes his own, however briefly. The poet has an acceptance of the mortality of Man and his influence which she has gained since she wrote 'Time' in the Garden book with its need to establish roots quickly. The feeling of being a fugitive is not present in Time and Place where there is a sense of everything having its place in 'due season'. Ursula Bethell was a deeply religious woman and, although her later poems were more explicitly religious in content, there are references here to Scripture, liturgical services and tenets and practices of Christian belief. There is also an acceptance of the weakness and transience of Man in relation to the bounty and perpetuity of Nature and, by implication, God. This deep

religious conviction was an influence upon the Garden poetry, but here, in Time and Place, she expresses the joy she speaks of in 'Autumn Afternoon', and the renewal she finds in the contemplation of Nature seen in the ecstatic 'May night':

> O radiant night! Here is renewal. Herein is vitality.
> Clear from the well of life shall spring the sparkling waters.
> Bright, bright are the glittering syllables: Peace, and
> Perpetual Light.

The serenity of tone to be found in such lines is an indication of strength of her conviction and the calibre of her poetic thought which she was expressing in this volume as she has sharpened her craft as a poet. She has widened the range of thought and imagery, and asserts her vision with greater confidence. As the 'Envoy', which closes the volume of seasonal poems, points out she is able to use her poetry to give thanks for the 'felicity' she has experienced in the moment of seeing and in remembering. Ursula Bethell has put more emphasis on the visionary aspect of her work and is using the visual as a tool to illustrate and expand her philosophical ideas.

CHAPTER IV

DAY AND NIGHT

Although Day and Night was published in 1939, the poems collected in this volume were written between 1924 and 1934. In a letter to Miss Bethell, dated December 21st, 1939, H.C.D. Somerset points out that some of them were 'the poems left from the Sidgwick and Jackson book,' (i.e. From a Garden in the Antipodes.) After the death of Miss Pollen in 1934, Ursula Bethell had written little poetry except the annual 'Memorials', so it is difficult to talk about a progression in Bethell's work from the 'visual' to the 'visionary' as a chronological process of growth within the poet, since the light and fresh poems of the Garden were written contemporaneously with those more complex and overtly religious poems. Rather, there is a progression in themes as each book becomes more concerned with the metaphysical contemplations of the poet himself.

Day and Night begins with a dedication to Rise Cottage where she had lived happily for ten years from 1924 to 1934:

> Ad te limen amabile levavi oculos tibi haec carmina
> et quidquid inest leporis pietatis signum dedico.
> (I have lifted up my eyes to you, lovable threshold,
> I dedicate these lyrics and whatever charm they
> possess to you as a sign of piety.)

It is an intensely personal study of the universe, as the poet approaches Nature and its significance with a delight in the Nature she sees about her. From the response she finds within herself to Nature, she then draws out the devotional theme which has been inspired by the view. In every aspect of Nature she sees the hand of God, and it is the sense of His presence

that Bethell attempts to express in her poetry, as she says in 'Spring Snow and Tui': 'It is all one. The same hand scatters the blossoms of winter and springtime.' The themes of the life and death of Nature and of Man dominate Bethell's contemplations, and they evoke imagery which often contrasts the lightness of life, spring and colour with the darkness of death, winter and the chains that bind us to our earthly existence. She is also dealing with the contrasts between one state of being and another, and as if to underline the complexity of Man's existence we are sometimes confronted with a seeming paradox as this image of the rose in 'Rose-Wreath' suggests:

> Beauty, now in Death's disguise,
> silencing these stammering lips,
> sealing these astonished eyes,
> that our sight closes on earth's dear mummery,
> to wake upon your counterpart, mirage roses,
> where new-born lovely in the unveiled morn
> is hailed by the clear eye for true,
> peace wears no rue
> for past enchantment, and prepares no treachery,
> and pleasure bears no sting, no spiky thorn,
> not like these my roses.

With the themes of life and death, Bethell is concentrating on the 'visionary' aspect of her craft, but, as in Time and Place, she uses her gift for visual imagery as an integral and important part of the exposition of her theme. Life and death in Man is echoed and presaged in the life and death of the seasons, and the life and death of natural objects such as the roses, in a theme she is continually developing. Bethell also uses the imagery of the life and death of the day, dawn is linked with new life, spring and new beginnings. Bethell arranges her suite of poems to follow the pattern of the seasons twice through. Dawn and early mornings are often associated with spring, summer with afternoon, and night-time, midnight

and the pre-dawn hours with winter. The relationship between the seasonal and diurnal patterning is not as rigid as that of Time and Place, but nevertheless is an important concept in her range of imagery:

> The Spring-purged sky's dazzle,
> The first sun's brightness, the golden lightness,
> This glitter, this glory, this morning jubilee.
>
> ('Out on a Spring Morning')

There is also an emphasis on time of day for contemplation, and for Ursula Bethell it would seem that this was late at night and early in the morning, judging by the number of poems that are set at this time in a mood of night-long vigil or waking early. It is perhaps not surprising that such meditation should centre upon life and death, and it seemed sometimes as if death was very close:

> On a grey morning before the stars have gone out,
> hoarse-voiced east-wind assaulting sleep-silences,
> I wake and remember the cruel embraces of death.
> The pitiless clutch, the fearful down-hold,
> the fierce, the final assertion of physical mastery,
> sobbing and stifled endeavour of fugitive breath.
>
> Spirit of life, Spirit of beauty, make haste to save us;
> show in the east again the signal of victory;
> as in the beginning let the beacon be lit.
> Orient splendour of light everlasting, come thou,
> illumine us who sit death's darkness and shadow.
> Creator, oh cast this last enemy down to the fiery pit.
>
> ('Waiting for Dawn')

This prayer that dawn should come again and lift the presence of death from her is a theme she returns to in these night-time and early morning poems. Life is celebrated with the awareness of ever-present death, and dawn is greeted with relief, as we see in the last line from 'The Small Hours."

'dawn, night-denying, hail to you, hail to you in the east!'

Nature becomes a source of peace and reassurance from the fears of death which haunt her:

> Eternal Spirit of Beauty, thy thoughts are very deep;
> Unsearchable are thy riches. Wherefore dost thou keep
> The soul athirst for loveliness? Far past
> Our dream thy plenitude - shalt thou not at the last
> Give drink enough to appease from the fountains of thy deep?
> Tonight, by this draught renewed, I turn to sleep.
>
> ('Night of July.')

There is also a sense of surrender and of acceptance of whatever God chooses to send:

> All night long thy pure music, beautiful Spirit,
> Disciplined my spirit, these keen, deep hours of June,
> And I lie quiet, offering my heart to be a wintry wind-harp,
> Whereby thou mightest, peradventure, breathe a heavenly tune.
>
> ('Winter Night.')

Bethell examines the theme of death from many angles and traces her own changing attitude to it, including her own uncertainty and the feeling that she is not yet ready. In uncertainty and unreadiness she expresses her fear of the unknown which lies ahead. But acceptance eventually comes, and she begins to prepare herself by furnishing the memory:

> Record, record, memory, these calm awakenings
> To autumn amplitude - there are so few left, now,
> Before (what spiritual sheaves there may be, garnered,)
> That other morning breaks on other shore.
>
> ('Autumn Dawn')

The poet's joy on waking is expressed well in 'Spring South-Wester', providing a strong contrast with the storms of the night. These storms are the meditational struggles undergone by the poet in those times of emotional uncertainty when death seems very close. The night is often a time when the fear of death is strong and dawn comes as a welcome relief:

Coming back to life this morning,
I hear chastising rain-tornadoes
Racing north from icy kingdoms,
Lashing eucalyptus twigs for whipthongs,
Dashing the young tender verdure
Of roses on their own thorn-armature,
Torn and pierced in shouting fury;
But, laced upon the fierce confusion,
Sweet, sweet, eclipsing tempest,
Matin bird-song's fluted descant ...

(Night, night, all the storms have broken over me,
Yet is thy music, life, unsilenced, oh! and lovelier.)

In her theme of life and death, Bethell has sought to explore all the facets that combine to form the metaphysical environment of Man in his mortal state. Life and death are 'all one', and she has attempted to look at their relationship beginning to work towards some acceptance of death as a part of life. The metaphysical theme of mortality requires a 'visionary' treatment, and the images which Miss Bethell has established as having particular meaning for her are again to the fore in these poems. Changes in hills and mountains, the sea, the sky, and the contrasts between light and dark, and between day and night and the seasonal changes are all brought into play. Helen Shaw points out that:

> Certain images are ardently pursued but seldom repetitively since those upon which her vision depends - Rose, Sea-bird, Wave, Mountain, River - are continuously being developed ..... (1)

As we have seen Bethell use the hills as an image of the source of solace and comfort in 'Pause' in the Garden poems and in 'Levavi Oculos' in Time and Place, and we find it again in 'Autumn Dawn', where 'Pure mountains speaking peace, ...' remind us of the serenity she finds in these reminders of God's handiwork. This serenity she finds embodied in the mountains is developed into images of guardianship in the 'long black

stockade' of 'After Dark' and the 'strongholds' of'9th July, 1932.' Their agelessness is also remarked upon in images which echo:

> .... Even as the mountains
> From age in majesty and apartness,
> Recording on their rock-entablatures returning seasons,
> So stand we fast.
>
> ('Autumn on the Plain')

Yet she cannot allow herself to forget their recent history as she recalls in 'Picnic' in imagery of violent volcanic life:

> considering that those composed and sweetly-sleeping
> hill-slopes
> were but the mellowed refuse from infernal furnaces
> flinging, the other day, their molten boulders heavenwards.

Surely these cannot be the same hills: 'There are old mountain hollows charged with oracles...'. The hills in 'Limitation' have European connotations which do not sit easily alongside the volcanic images of 'Picnic' and 'Spring on the Plain'. Of the thirty-six images of mountains to be found in this collection of poems, most are 'visual' descriptions of the mountains to be seen from Bethell's cottage or on her journeys on the plains. In '6th July, 1930', for example, they are seen as sleeping giants waiting for dawn with the shadow death hovering about them:

> Lifting my head, I view snow-peaks irradiated
> With vital rose, where late, cold dormant sepulchres
> They slept at this same hour in shadowy greyness.

The changing colours of the mountains is an important factor in her observation of the contrasts to be found at different seasons and at different times of day. The hills change from the spring colours of 'Rainy Morning':

> Soluble colour, moss-green by purple-grey penetrated,
> Brown into blue turning, ...

to '...the delicate amethyst hills' of 'Summer Afternoon', while the colours of the mountains range from 'celestial azure' and 'turquoise and silver' through white, 'blue-white', and 'opaline' to grey, black and purple. In most cases the mountains are described as part of the setting for her contemplation. In the metaphorical uses she makes of the hills and mountains, they never lose their essential character as physical features of a landscape except in one case, in 'Midnight', a rather obscure poem which appears to contrast the 'bright stimulus' of life and of day with the 'deep stillness' of night and of death. The contrast here between states of being is very strong with the day-time bustle of the 'Gear-change on the up-and-down hill of hypothesis;' and 'the acrid, mountainy wind's austere caresses;' of solitary midnight contemplation.

While such imagery is clever and performs the function Bethell requires of it, it is the simpler picturesque images of the quality of those in 'Morning Walk' which seem to be in the true essence of Bethell's gift for description. They integrate the 'visionary' quality of her poetry with the subtle last line:

> On a bright morning of winter I took the bitumined highway
> to forget the fret of the fetters of down-tending detail,
> of diurnal subsistence escape delight-dimming screen.
>
> The morning air was full of the cries of humanity active,
> red sparks rising up to the whiter light of silence;
> the eternal mountains, aloof, maintained their endless
> procession;
> like tender bloom on curve of immature peach-skin
> clung fugitive frost to the foot of the winter-green gullies;
> shone, sun-glossed gold and silver, the satiny tussock ...
> I kissed the chains that bind the body to bounty of
> earthly scene.

Bethell's simplest images are often her most effective and although she does develop complex images as she has done in the variations on the hills and mountains, they tend to become somewhat overwrought and work against the message of her poem as happens in 'Candour'. Here the image is repetitive in its insistence on the 'whiteness' of everything, yet the remoteness of the description of the mountains does not add to our understanding of their relevance to the rest of the poem:

> White, past belief, the high and snowy mountains,
> Phantom-like, visionary; whiteness upon whiteness
> Of frozen foam from far celestial fountains
> Suffused with soft and universal brightness.

The alliteration in the third line quoted here is awkward and would seem to belie the later line 'Untroubled, luminous and tranquil pure;' which is crisper and much more in tune with the idea of snowy mountains.

To illustrate her conception of death, Ursula Bethell uses images of darkness contrapuntally with vivid images of light and colour as in 'Lever de Rideau' a composition of light, colour and form. The images of town, mountain, ocean and bird combine to produce a montage of sensations of life which are yet shadowed by eternity and death:

> To-day
> the clocks strike
> seven, seven, seven, and church-bells
> chime busily, and the plain-town heavily wakes;
> a salt-sharp east wind flicks and swells
> and tosses my emerald silk curtains;
> translucent green on blue the empyrean, and lo!
> north and west, endlessly limned and painted,
> my mountains, my mountains, all snow.
>
> Now a change begins in the heavenly tone-chord;
> to the east, eyes! where the sea is incised
> like azure ice on sky of vermeil;
> oh, dream on prolonged, beautiful prelude!
> hushed still, delay, summoning bird-song!

hold, magic touch, be arrested, lovely crisis of sunrise!
when yonder death-white summits are rose-flushed
and glittering, I must
away.

These images of death in life can be worked out within a total poem as in 'Lever de Rideau' above, or caught in a single sharp image of a few lines:

... The black-robed psalmodist,
traversing swiftly the silent landscape like Azrael,
echoed in clear repetition his well-tuned antiphon;
a waking bugle it might be, a passing bell,
of life, death, life-telling: it is all one.

('Spring Snow and Tui.')

Here the tui is not only seen as a natural worshipper of the Creator with his 'well-tuned antiphon', but as the angel of death, harbinger of mortality, telling of the unity in the relationship between life and death. The vultures in 'Autumn on the Plain' fulfil a similar function.

Death, when contemplated in the long dark hours of sleeplessness takes on a very sombre image of 'darkness and shadow' and is often identified with sleep as a premonition of death to come. It is also seen as a weapon bringing pain and death in the midst of life, disrupting the poet's serenity. In 'Rose-wreath', the images of sharp weapons and sharp pain are likened to the thorns of a rose as the poet feels the pain of Beauty as a sharp wound inflicted by the rose:

But what is this reminding pain?
what weapon deen, kris, javelin,
what arrow from an alien sphere
pierces my serene content
with deeper hurt than starts a tear?
this silent, viewless weapon, whence?
  Beauty, for a wounding spear
    you take my roses!

But death does not always have the connotations of pain and cruelty of the two examples quoted above. In her exploration of death and its nature she comes to terms with its inevitability, and she has been led to this acceptance through her belief in God, which inspires her to offer her heart as 'a wintry wind-harp' to do his bidding. This offer of service and devotion is echoed in '6th July, 1930.' as she girds her soul with 'the whole armour of God'such as that recommended to the Ephesians by St. Paul. Nevertheless, the curiosity about death remained:

> (Will it be thus, thus, that quickening dawn?
> so still, so tearless, so composed, so gentle;
> will clinging dreams linger awhile like mist?
> some timeous candles glimmer, unextinguished?
> will native and colloquial notes prevent
> with gradual song the peerless jubilation?
> tincture of immortality be meted
> in mercy, drop by drop? lustration measured
> of these poor orbs, lest instant vision dazzle?
> and will the scene, unveiled, appear like this,
> loved and long-known, and beautiful, and new?)
>
> ('Summer Daybreak.')

Bethell sees death here as a new beginning, a passing over to something she is familiar with, but she wonders whether she will be fit company to join in 'the peerless jubilation' when the time comes.

Life is seen in the images of colour and light, and birds are often the heralds of a dawn of new promise and returning life. The dawn chorus is thus a welcome sound which rouses the poet from sleep and returns her to the conscious world with an awareness of the joy and beauty of a new day. These bright and joyful bird images stand in contrast to the occasional use of the bird as a harbinger of death as the tui was seen in 'Spring Snow and Tui', and in 'Spring on the Plain', for example, we have the image of the 'exalted skylark' who

sings of 'Life, life, resurgent life!' against a backdrop of exquisite mountains:

> And all is pavilioned with sheer celestial azure
> Hazing the far alps, their turquoise and silver;

As in her earlier books, Bethell is strongest in her pictures of natural beauty which she has observed as a personal experience, and there is a freshness and an uncomplicated delight in these examples of God's handiwork which imbues her descriptions with strength and character.

When Bethell becomes more overtly religious in theme, however, her lyrical power is sometimes pushed aside for the over-wrought and contrived image with which she attempts to express the depth of her religious commitment. To quote two examples for contrast will illustrate both the best and the worst of Bethell in religious mood. First, from 'Waves':

> Deep of heart calling to heart,
> Art yonder? calling. Yea, love, here.
> Deep of thought: thus, pondering,
> Thus, thus, probing. Nay, but, posing.
> Deep of soul: Lord, Lord,
> Out of the deep have I called,
> Lord, hear my voice.
>
> Not lost, these cries,
> In the deep bosom of time;
> Hear, to the low perpetual rumour:
> Kyrie eleison! Deus miseratur!
> Out of the abysm ever resounding
> Diapasonal answer: Alpha, Omega,
> I am the Beginning and the End.
>
> Here again .... deep under
> Earth's unease, immutable doom
> Thundering; appeasing the pain, the expectancy
> Of the prisoned, the burdened, looking for entelechy;
> Listen, as it were the sound of many waters:
> I, the Slain, am the Meaning, the Guerdon;
> I am the Ground, the Meed.

Listen again .... it is the Spirit
Come, saying, come. The dumb
Cosmos learning speech. Come Lord!
It is the Beautiful Shepherd piping
unwearied in the eternal meadows;
The Bridegroom, ready Bride summoning
With dominant: Behold I come.

and 'Southerly Sunday':

The great south wind has covered with cloud the whole
of the river-plain,
soft white ocean of foaming mist, blotting out, billowing
fast to the east, where Pacific main surges on vaster bed.

But here, on the hills, south wind unvapoured encounters
the sunshine,
lacing and interlocking, the invisible effervescence
you almost hear, and the laughter of light and air
at play overhead.

Seabirds fly free; see the sharp flash of their underwings!
and high lifted up to the north, the mountains,
the mighty, the white ones
rising sheer from the cloudy sea, light-crowned, established.

This sparkling day is the Lord's day. Let us be glad
and rejoice in it;
for he cometh, he cometh to judge and redeem
his beautiful universe,
and holds in his hands all worlds, all men, the quick
and the dead.

'Waves' suffers from Bethell's penchant for technical and abstruse words which, as Lawrence Baigent remarks, 'do not blend easily into the texture of the verse;' (2). It has sincerity and a genuine depth of mystical feeling in her attempt to express the waves of emotion which sweep over here in the turmoil of the working out of her religious beliefs, but its imagery is overwhelming. Despite the poems of acceptance and calm serenity in the knowledge of God's power, there are others with the passion and doubt of this one which express her doubt and her search for the resolution of her intellectual journey. She begins 'Waves' with a description of the seas where life began, but almost immediately the reader is distanced by the use of the scientific terms 'phytoplankton' and

'protoplasmic'. Bethell's strength has always been in her natural descriptions which are as close to the reader as they are to Bethell and which immediately draw the reader into the metaphysical exposition which follows, but the scientific terms of the early section of this poem work against the establishment of a bond between reader and poet so that it is more difficult to identify with the philosophical struggle of the soul in the second half of the poem. That is not to say, however, that the difficulties of diction including technical words such as 'diapasonal' and 'entelechy' and archaic terms such as 'abysm', negate the very depth of genuine emotion which moved Bethell to write this poem, which she defended strongly against the criticisms of D'Arcy Cresswell quoted in Chapter One. Nevertheless, the depth of feeling does not necessarily produce good poetry, and 'Waves' is obscure and overwrought.

'Southerly Sunday' is an expression of the simple beauties of sea, hills and seabirds within the context of joyful praise to the Lord. The simple imagery which is drawn from direct observation seems to become symbolic, particularly in the images of the seabirds and the mountains, in a sympathetic landscape where even the south wind seems to echo Bethell's mood of rejoicing. There is not the overwhelming imagery of 'Waves' here, and the verse moves in its slow elegaic lines to a fitting and 'sparkling' close. The liturgical echoes of praise express her calm convictions of a mood far-removed from the pain and soul-searching of 'Waves'. Ursula Bethell believed that Christian conviction was not a simple and serene contemplation of a beneficent Saviour, but a growing and changing process of intellectual discovery and inquiry.

This changeability can be found in the very different poems to be found in this collection. Some express those moments of anxious night-time meditation which produced deep intellectual insight and poems about the closeness of death. There are other poems which express those moments of peace, serenity and acceptance. The Day and Night poems are concerned with the religious life of the poet and with expressing the disquiet of her meditations. Hers was a restless, probing mind which explored the things she did not yet understand, and sought to comprehend the universe of God's creation through the sympathetic observation of Nature and this is vital to the poem for music, 'At the Lighting of the Lamps' which is a devotional piece. It begins with the 'modulations' of nature portrayed in the setting of the sun as she observed it from the Cashmere Hills and the 'ebbing harmonies' of the gradual fading of colour from the sky as it passes from the reds and golds of the sun to the greys of dusk and the 'sable' of the 'all-encompassing dark' are expressed in musical imagery. Then there is the contrast of the lights springing up on the plain as it comes alive in imagery of music and movement. The lights of Man are echoed in the response of the stars in the age-old 'music of the spheres', which leads to a recalling of early Christianity and an evocation of a universal and omnipotent Lord with all of Nature at his fingertips. The fifth section is prayer-like in its invocation to 'the One' and celebration and praise to the Lord from whom all light comes. Section six ends the poem where it began with the lights on the plain, in concert with the stars, 'the lamps of God' above, and both with a new and broader meaning. This balance between the two sets of lights is an expression of intellectual understanding rather than of a mystical or

visionary experience, for the lights are observed with a coolness that contrasts with the emotional burst of praise in section five. Bethell has written a devotional piece of depth and subtlety which is a good example of her more restrained religious poetry in which the intellectual expression of a theme already thought through is brought to fruition.

Both the opening poem 'To-day', and the closing poem 'Limitation' are productions of the visionary aspect of her work and they attempt to personify an abstract concept. In the former, Dawn confers upon the poet the gift of a new day with all the 'arbitrament, doom, glory' that it might bring. There is resignation and acceptance in the poet and that is also to be found in some of the poems in this book. The figure of dawn in his stern splendour is to be found in the poet's vision of a stern God that can be found even in the praise and prayer sections of 'At the Lighting of the Lamps'. The figure of Time remains more abstract and also has the sense of sternness with her power over Man as her prisoner. 'Eternity is in love with the productions of time.' (3) and these 'productions of time' have a voice with which to speak of 'wider fields', the supernatural world. In this poem, Bethell speaks of the supernatural world through natural objects, and we understand their language: 'our hearts being tuned secretly/ To ultramundane stave.' This reflects Bethell's own method of permitting the Supernatural to speak through the Natural in a language we understand, and this poem, though it cannot be counted among her best, is an expression of her view of what the poet ought to be doing in relating the supernatural world and the natural world:

Time, tacit wardress of our earthly paradise,
Is it well done that you speak no word ever of wider fields?
Howbeit, you have not cognizance, for more than us your
prisoners,
Time, are you bonded slave.

But the birds are commissioned to remit messages;
But every tree a whispering, mysterious harp holds;
The sea has a voice, rivers are everywhere melodious,
And there are certain earth-mounds,
There are old mountain hollows charged with oracles ...
Sometimes, while the wind changes, we may hear sounds
We have waited for, our hearts being tuned secretly
To ultramundane stave.
They were frighted, heard they no imperial
Still voice hidden in the breeze
Shall say to mandatary Time, obsequious:
Hand me the keys.

The 'hearts', which are synonymous in this case with souls, want Time to hand over the keys and set them free from their earthly prison. The poet also believes that Nature belongs to Time but holds the key to 'ultramundane' truths, and she is able to write of one world in relation to the other. This has been the mode of Bethell's writing throughout all of her books, particularly in her 'visionary' poetry. Because this is the last book put together by Ursula Bethell in her lifetime, it can be considered as a final statement on both her method of writing poetry, and of her religious convictions. Her close identification of the natural world as the illustration of the supernatural world is expressed in natural imagery of the mountains, sea and sky as the 'mirror' of the Holy Spirit. This is the most intensely metaphysical of her books of poetry with its themes of life and death seen in the perspective of the relationship of natural objects as the voices of the Super-natural. Bethell has used the visual imagery of natural objects to translate her vision of the Supernatural into metaphysical poetry. In this book she has looked to Nature for metaphor to

illustrate her inspiration rather than find her initial inspiration in Nature as she had done in the Garden poetry. As her last personal poetic statement, it is a study of the philosophical implications of Man's relationship with Nature as regulated by Time. Ursula Bethell was a visionary poet of intellectual strength, but her imaginative power was not always equal to her inspiration.

CHAPTER V

THE COLLECTED POEMS

After the death of Ursula Bethell in 1945, there was a body of unpublished poetry in her effects. Some of those closest to her felt that some of these poems should be published along with the re-issue of her previously published works as one volume. This had been mooted before her death and had found her approval and support. There was much discussion between Lawrence Baigent, Dr Helen Simpson and Charles Brasch as to which of the unpublished poems, and some of those which had been published in the literary pages of the Press, should now be presented in a collected edition. As Charles Brasch pointed out in a letter to Dr Simpson, dated 27th August, 1946, 'it would be no kindness to M.U.B.'s reputation' to print what he regarded as 'notes for poems & not poems'. To Lawrence Baigent, in a letter written the same day, he expressed the opinion that they 'should not admit many doubtful pieces into the collected edition, which is not primarily a book of relics & a work of piety.' The general opinion was that there were amongst Ursula Bethell's papers many poems which she would have revised or rejected if she had decided to prepare them for publication herself. To this end they omitted many of the 'By the River Ashley' pieces which they felt did not reach the high standards Miss Bethell would have set herself. It was decided that they would include five occasional poems, six Memorial poems written annually to commemorate the death of Effie Pollen, and six pieces from the proposed longer autobiographical work 'By the River Ashley'.

In the five occasional poems we see once again Bethell's

preoccupation with themes of mortality, the strength of her religious beliefs despite her searching for reassurance, and the numinous quality that the scenery always had for her. These are themes which she had explored before and there is little new for her to say about these even in those later poems 'Looking Down on Mesopotamia' (dated 1937) and 'Kaikoura. Winter, 1941.' We do find a new serenity however, in the sureness of God's purpose despite the tribulations of mortal existence:

> ... As to the wind his pinion
> gives ocean-homing seagull, repose and impulse one,
> so to the high places we bring earth's burden,
> the travail, stress, and patience of the ages,
> so to the high altars the heart's anguish,
> our grief, our desolation, even our despair ...
> Night has fallen. Earth sleeps wrapped round
> with the sure purpose of eternity.
>
> ('Looking Down on Mesopotamia')

In 'Kaikoura. Winter, 1941' there is even a sense that Bethell longs for the 'harbour' of death, for though she is happy in the 'intimate Eden' of the scene before her, she is reminded of the fragility of the happiness of the scene:

> Yet still I hear the thunder of the waves' blind battering ...
> I hear the hunger of the undertow, the sucked stones' hiss ...
> False peace! all's peril. Here's no hold, no harbour ...
> Oh! to ride, seagull, surely
> over the abyss of whirling waters,
> to plunge into the tumult
> unseeing, safe, in the dark crypt of the breakers
> (loosed, my soul, from earth-lust)
> secured through insecurity.

The theme of death naturally pervades the 'Memorials' with a sense of loss and desolation, yet the very season in which she writes is laden with the promise of new life and new hope. As time passes there is a growth in acceptance, though the

pain does not quite ever pass and she looks forward to her own death:

> Because the years to months diminish, days to hours,
> And love is stronger
> Than death's anger
> I have adorned today, alone, my brief abiding place with flowers.
>
> ('November, 1936')

In the 'By the River Ashley' selection, Bethell has recalled vivid childhood memories and tempered these with adult apprehension of the richness of such experiences. The adult Bethell, in recalling her childhood memories, is well aware of the deeper significance of the scenery she grew to love while still a child. She becomes aware of the closeness of death in a childhood experience which foreshadows her father's death, and she ends with a strong religious theme of faith.

Bethell continued to work on those themes which had exercised her poetic talents and her intellectual and philosophical interests all her life. She wrote of her meditations and emotional reponses in terms of the familiar images of mountain, sea and sea-bird, either in general terms as 'black, fluttering birds' in '14th August, 1930', or in the more specific 'seagull' of 'Looking Down on Mesopotamia' and 'Kaikoura. Winter, 1941.'. The seabird is a symbol for the human soul flying free from earthly restraints:

> And, breasting eagerly the sea-fresh current,
> Seawards beat three birds, with urgent flutterings,
> Lost now in wreathing dusk, and now emerging,
> Till, bare-discerned black specks, far haze receives them...
>
> ...But the impermanent clouds drift, drift to dissolution,
> And the black, fluttering birds, so sharply there, now are not;

Even so we, athwart insentient largeness,
We flutter eager, a few moments, and then are not.

('14th August, 1930')

In the same poem Bethell uses a description of dawn which echoes the dawn imagery of earlier poems in the careful use of shading, drifting colours which her artist's eye was keenly observant of:

Softly the drifts of mist-grey into lilac,
To purple turn, to umber, shell-rose and vermilion,
Passing on the sea-breeze slowly and dissolving
Into the periwinkle dome of noble daybreak.

We have seen this precision before in the 'modulations' of the description of the sunset in the first part of 'At the Lighting of the Lamps', where the ebbing colours are described with the same careful attention to the progression of one colour into another as the light changes. This same sense of the slow change of colour is caught in 'Looking Down on Mesopotamia' but in a less detailed sketch where the poet's attention is turned to the idea of death and that image has become more important to her:

Again at sundown I have watched the tussock
glow and fade to pallor, merge with darkness
where rain-hewn rocks, ice-chiselled bastions
bleed to death in cataracts of stones.

'In a Hospital, Christmas Eve, 1932.' uses the imagery of the rose and the lily in a sense of death that reminds the reader of 'Warning of Winter' in Time and Place, and 'Rose-wreath' in Day and Night:

The lily breathes by many a grave,
And crimson roses bide a thorn, ...

On this Christmas Eve, she is reminded of the death of Christ

and of the sacrifice he made, which tempers the images of the Nativity, and is made plain in the contrast between the 'summer's bright array' of the antipodeal Christmas with the snows of Christ's birthplace.

In 'Evening Walk in Winter', Bethell begins with a sympathetic description of the scenery that surrounds her on her walk, using powerful imagery which suggests the solace we know she has often gained in the past in her contemplation of the scenery, yet she rejects this idea as false:

> Now stars rushed out to fill the void with sparkling
> affirmations,
> their cold acumen spoke no comfort, as before,
> the heavens vacant;
> mirror-moon shone false from fire afar.
>
> Darkly alone, the errant hour outspent, led downwards
> by homing track, the lowly glittering chain
> lit round
> hearth-fastness beckoned there was warmth within.
>
> Oh not by late-launched planets flung in heavens equivocal
> may we, or making moonlight wan and wild
> oracular,
> be certified of life or death, of heat or cold.
>
> The bright particular hearts mysteriously enkindled
> for us - the daily love, like fire that glows and runs
> half hidden
> among the embers - this the warmth we live by, our
> unsetting sun.

How different were her sentiments in 'Twinkled to Sleep' in Day and Night, which is full of brightly 'flashing' images of light:

> Cerulean night-sky
> Star-set;
> Stygian-dark river-plain
> East, north, west,
> Dance-set;
> Myriad amber-flashing
> lights dancing, rays flashing, all night.

Delight! delight! Inexpressible heart-dance
With these.
Strange heart-peace, in sparkling lights!
Blithe heart-ease, starry peace, dancing repose!
Star-charmed, dance-enchanted eyes close,
Appeased.

Dance in jet-dark depth, in star-set height,
Lights dancing, west, east,
Star-high, heart-deep,
All night.

This excitement finds a subdued echo in part III of 'At the Lighting of the Lamps', where Bethell is still intrigued by their 'calm antiphonal' splendour. In 'Evening Walk in Winter' with its rejection of the rush of the stars Bethell is in a very sombre frame of mind as she contemplates a question which often features in other phrasing in those poems in which death is a source of some anxiety to the poet:

What if the light go out? What if some black disaster
of total nightfall quench the vivid spark?
Oh might we hearken,
then, with night-initiate Spaniard to the Answerer
who said: I am the dark.

Night and darkness are images that Bethell has used for the bleakness of death, and night is again used in 'Looking Down on Mesopotamia' where sundown is closely linked with the stones as an image of death. Bethell here rejects the solace she can no longer find in 'great solitudes' and 'deep silences'. Though the images of coldness and desolation are used in this poem, Bethell ends it with the image of Earth asleep secure in the 'sure purpose of eternity', a comforting image which seems at odds with the coldness of the imagery which precedes it. Security is also a concept in the final poem in this group: 'Kaikoura. Winter, 1941.' in which Bethell once again returns to the images of mountains and sea which have served her so well in the past and imbues them with qualities of

endurance and strength. The imagery here is of a benevolent Nature at peace in 'this intimate Eden' and the poet once more envisions the scenery in a sympathetic sense, even with the fury of the waves as a symbol for the 'false peace' she finds in earthly existence now. Bethell has here reproduced the natural images in carefully detailed stanzas which have all the cadences of calm, continuing, benevolent Nature:

> But I no seabird! On this gradual mound,
> Upon its firm and interwoven turf
> I rest and gaze, in the shelter of a bank
> of gorse in bloom and breathing scented air,
> At thickest yellow thrust across the blue
> Of mountain snows and up to the hot sun;
> On a far hillock's crest the aspiring arms
> Of a dark pine against the placid sky;
> Or at the bare, the rose-brown willows bunched
> Where a curved dimple, rain-filled, in the grass
> Finds the deep-carved conduit by the road.
>
> No flock is gathered in this field's enclosure
> To stir the silence; but in further meadows
> The browsing sheep and the set, ruminant cattle
> Impart to the still scene a soothing rhythm;
> And now bird-shuttlecock, black fantail flutters
> About a low bush, and, perched sideways,
> Courts my attention to his circus fancies,
> Nearer, each sally, varies his approaches,
> Invites response to his confiding prattle ...
> Small, fragile bird, today shall send us happy,
> Here in this intimate Eden, this close anchorage ...

This echoes the calm serenity of the harvest scene in 'Autumn Afternoon' in Time and Place, which has a similar setting. In the final stanza the imagery of the tumult of the sea draws the poet back to the dangers she has temporarily forgotten in the contemplation of the placid scenery before her. She has used familiar images in new and disturbing ways as she tries to express her greater dissatisfaction with earthly scenery. It is only in the Kaikoura poem that she returns to her former use of the imagery of a landscape that is sympathetic to the poet's meditations.

In 'By the River Ashley', the poet's thoughts on the scenery of her childhood and the impact it made upon her are expressed in the imagery of Nature: the stones, the river, the sea and the fields. The imagery used to describe the pebbles which caught a child's eye for their bright and beautiful colours is used to capture the disillusionment of growing older just as the pebbles lose their colour in water, things are not what they may appear. The picture of a pleasant childhood rich in experience is shadowed by this early disappointment and there is a hint of other sadnesses in the parenthesis of the fourth stanza of section I:

> Over the wooden bridge, rumble-bumpy, tugged the North Train,
> so reliable, so reasonable the North Train,
> it knew where it was going and got there in course of time.
> Noble look, incomparable sounds, but it went out of our lives
> without envy. A rich life we had, and the days full ...
> (oh God, Thou knowest the sorrows, I will tell of the pleasure,
> others lacked what I had, if I lacked their joy).

In each of the sections of 'By the River Ashley' the poet has described an idyllic scene, but introduced a note of disillusionment or sadness to add poignancy to the freshness of the childhood memory. Section II with its sensual imagery of the sights and smells of wash-day uses the childhood memory of the willows, recalled in adulthood in alien environments far away from the childhood scene where they first made their impact. Section III is expressed in a straightforward narrative style which is reminiscent of the Garden poems with the balance between the description of the ride at her father's side and the tableau they witnessed, and the death of her father which followed 'too soon' after. The mountains and the young Bethell's reaction to them is caught in the second stanza of section IV, tempered immediately with the 'prompt rebuff' of

the 'grown-up guests'. Bethell goes on to explain their 'significance' in a stanza which combines the physical presence of Mt. Grey with the metaphysical connotations of comfort and great age the mountains have always symbolised for her. The river which is described in section V is the Waimakariri, an important river in the Canterbury landscape, and larger than the Ashley which was familiar in childhood:

> The rivers, over and over again the rivers.
> They hasten to you, look up them, up the riverbeds.
> From the soft dark forest they come down,
> Or from the snows, carving their patterns
> Of tawny terraces they come hastening down
> To where by archipelagoes of silver,
> Lizard twists of azure, tranced lagoons,
> We hear the ripples and the silence sing together
> With the small soft sighing of the tussock,
> And flax-spears' rattle, and, might be, a seabird's call.
> These were the harmonies, splashed often now
> By sudden hue of alien weed, still beautiful.

This is the kind of lyrical description of a natural landscape that we have come to expect from Ursula Bethell. There is, however, the postscript of religious meditation that she always adds, and in this collection it is to be found in the section which ends the selection from 'By the River Ashley', section VI:

> The hour is dark. The river comes to its end,
> Comes to the embrace of the all enveloping sea.
> My story comes to its end.
>
> Divine Picnicker by the lakeside,
> Familiar friend of the fishermen,
> Known and yet not known, lost and yet found,
> The hour is dark, come down to the riverside.
> The strange river, come find me.
> Bring if it might be companions
> In the tissue of the Kingdom, but come thou,
> Key to all mystery, opening and none shall shut again,
> Innermost love of all loves, making all one.
> Come.

While it cannot be said that this is Bethell's final statement since it lacks the authorial authority that the published books

of poems which she collated, it is true that it shows a mature acceptance of the Divine Mysteries which she had been debating within herself. There is a sense that she is waiting for her life to come to its end, as the river and the story have come to theirs.

The 'Memorials' on the other hand do have some kind of authorial authority as a statement not only of Bethell's deep sense of loss after the death of her companion Effie Pollen, but also of her attitude towards death. Throughout her earlier work, Bethell had been exploring the mortality of Man, whilst examining her own religious beliefs and convictions. In the 'Memorials' she perhaps comes closest to combining both of these themes into a statement of her attitudes towards death. To aid her in this, she enlists the nature imagery which has served her so well in the past. In the first 'Memorial' 'October, 1935.', the imagery of the spring green of the willows, the yellow of the gorse and the favourite little bird the 'riro-riro' all herald a new spring season of new life and new growth, all of which is lost on the poet in her grief. To see again the sights she once shared so happily with the departed companion is to experience added sorrow and to invest spring with a new and depper meaning, as she says: 'Now that I know how spring time is heart-break,'. In this poem Bethell is still feeling the keen edge of loss and one senses that her religious beliefs have not yet brought her a personal message of acceptance and hope. There is desolation in 'Now you have left me to look upon all that is lovely, alone.', but the image of the little bird with his song which recalls the joy of the past in the first memorial is echoed in the 1936 memorial in a different guise for this time he symbolises the hope which Bethell has learned. Compare the 1935 memorial:

The loved little bird is singing his small song,
Dearest, and whether the trill of the riro
Reminded, we wondered, of joy or of sorrow --
Now I am taught it is tears, it is tears
that to springtime belong.

with the echo in the 1936 memorial:

Now that our rain-bird, little grey bird, pipes again
Hid in the leafage,
And for my grieving
Links, oh I could think, a note of hope, of hope,
into his plaintive chain.

The hope that Bethell now hears in the song of the riro-riro finds acknowledgement in the final stanza of the 1936 memorial as the poet begins to feel the healing effects of time:

Because the years to months diminish, days to hours,
And love is stronger
Than death's anger
I have adorned today, alone, my brief abiding place with flowers.

Spring and love have asserted their power over the desolation and loss, and the poet, though still grieving for her lost friend, has learned new hope. The riro image appears again in the memorial for 1937, but only fleetingly as part of the picture of the garden which the poet and her companion shared. It is the whole appearance of 'young summer' which has the effect upon the poet, and there is a feeling of new acceptance of the finality of death in this poem in spite of the poet's own loneliness:

Left with all this, I lack what made it mine.
If you lack nothing, I will not complain.
I shall not wish you here again, with me, today.

November 1938 finds the poet in Wellington where the memory is nudged by the harbour that the companion had 'loved so well' which is now an image which brings to mind the safe harbour that

one comes to after death. It is often used by Bethell in poems where the soul is thought to arrive on another shore or in a safe anchorage after the passage of death. Here the poet wonders at the enduring quality of love even after death, comparing it with the enduring quality of the sea even after 'the September tempest' of the death in springtime of Effie Pollen. The fifth memorial is set in another harbour, Akaroa, which brings back to the poet memories of earlier visits there when they could still be together. This memorial has echoes of 'The Long Harbour' with its 'hillside ossuary', and similar imagery of sea, and the native trees on the hillsides which surround the harbour. The old 'cone-gatherer' has an obvious Wordsworthian ring both in the imagery and the impersonality of the 'rustic' who is as useful to the poet as any other natural object for contemplation. The poet's contemplation returns again to herself in an attempt to find meaning in the solitude and loneliness after the death of one who was close to her:

> To me, unworthy, once in punctual succour sent,
> By the same sacred Will on sudden caught away,
> You left me, darling, desolate - might it not be to find,
> To accomplish in my solitude some unfinished work,
> To glean some stormy harvest that remains? - oh rest,
> Rest in your lucid haven. See, I am content,
> Rest peaceful. The task ended, then I follow on.

The images used in this poem have become subdued with familiarity and are observed in a detached way as the emotion of grief has faded into cliché phrases: 'My heart will ache for you until it also sleep.' It seems as if the agonies of the grief felt in the memorial of 1935 are only dimly echoed here and in the final memorial, 'Spring, 1940. (Christchurch)' where the appearance of Spring duly awakens the 'complaint' to the

'Spirit of Beauty' but there is now the sense of the intellect working on the manifestations of grief as she had begun to do in the 1939 memorial. In 1940 it would seem that the object of the seasonal grief has been sublimated to the intellectual exercise of making a poem about grief:

> Match Spring with vision, Spirit of Beauty, bring
> With your persuasive love to the inward eye awakening,
> Lest looking on this life to count what time has taken
> I cannot bear the pain.

The willow is explicitly taken as a symbol to sustain the poet in her mourning and she gives it the virtues of faith, hope and charity, yet it has not the close personal symbolism of the tiny rainbird in the first two memorials of 1935 and 1936.

The 'Memorials' trace Bethell's attempt to explain to herself the reasons for and the effects of the death of Effie Pollen. Initially it would seem that her faith deserted her and gradually we see a progression through the poems where hope and acceptance born of her Christian beliefs replace that first despair. Unfortunately, we also see a progression towards a more intellectual understanding which seems colder and more removed from the emotion which was more sincere in the earlier poems. The 1940 poem is the most impersonal of them all and it strives for effect with the use of sophisticated imagery for the presence of death while the departed friend has become less important to the theme and content of the poem. As a religious poem, it strives for effect but we feel that the poet is now more preoccupied with the accepted forms of devotional poetry and that the supplication from 'Spring, 1940.': 'As in time past my joy, hear my complaint now,/ Spirit of Beauty, here.' cannot be compared with the strength of the heartfelt cry of 'For November, 1938.':

'(Creator, pitiful Redeemer, love-reviving Spirit, make it so!)'. Somehow I feel that the more emotional earlier poems are closer to the bone than the later memorials which are written in a calmer frame of mind with the desolation and grief held firmly in check. This is echoed in the change in the sort of imagery which has been used with symbolism becoming more important than the visual imagery which can be seen in a comparison between the vision of green in the first and last memorials:

> The green has come back, the spring green, the new green,
> Darling, the young green upon the field willows,
> And the gorse on the wild hills was never so yellow,
> Together, together, past years we have looked on the scene.
>
> ('October, 1935')

> Marvel! Apparition! - Before the all-wintry years
> How often we had watched, in Spring, the purple-misted
> Veils to a green haze dissolve about the willows,
> Condense to a green rain.
>
> ('Spring, 1940')

The second image is more 'poetic' and less personal, and the rhythm of the second example is that of a considered emotion which has cooled into recollection, while the rhythm of the first is that of a vivid and continuing emotion which has not cooled but is still fresh for the poet.

The publication of the Collected Poems in 1950, was described by both Baigent (1) and Baxter (2) as a major literary event. As Baxter points out:

> The organic development of her thought is clearly apparent there, as it is not in the same degree in separate volumes.

It is this collecting together of her poetry that enables us to get a clearer idea of how the themes Ursula Bethell used

and how they develop throughout her work. The recurring symbols of mountain, sea, trees and birds reflect her strong feeling for the images of Nature and the important part they played in her poetry as she expressed her visionary ideas through visual imagery. In looking at her work as a whole in this way it is difficult to read individual poems in isolation. The occasional poems added by Dr Simpson in the Collected Poems give the added dimension of seeing these familiar images picked up again in her last poems.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Basil Dowling's article (1) which points out the two aspects of Ursula Bethell's work that he finds salient, 'the visual and the visionary' would seem to point to a division between them, but I have found in my study of her work that it is not possible to completely divorce the visual from the visionary for she used strongly visual imagery even in the most profoundly metaphysical poetry. Miss Bethell had an observant eye for the changes in colour and form wrought on Nature by changes in the seasons and time of day, and she caught these to good effect to illustrate the ideas behind her poetry. Her visionary poetry relies a good deal upon the visual effect of careful description to set the scene as an explanation of the religious premise of the poem. In the volume From a Garden in the Antipodes where the visionary poetry is only hinted at in a poem such as 'Pause', the best of the visual poetry stands on its own merits. However, it is difficult to find 'visionary' poetry which is able to make its point without strong visual imagery to illustrate the motivating thought behind it. I have given examples of poems in which Bethell has melded successfully the two elements, and examples of those in which the imagery is overwrought and has overloaded the theme. She was a religious poet whose visual sense rarely failed her, though her poetic sense sometimes did when the religious motivation blinded her to poetic self indulgence.

In any study of Miss Bethell's writing it would be difficult to ignore the important place in her life given to

religious study and meditation. In all her poetry there is a sense of order in God's handiwork which she accepts even in her struggle to understand the pain and uncertainty of death. In her difficulties with finding Christian resignation she sought to express her meditations in contemplative poetry which often has an insight to share with the reader possibly echoing his own contemplations. Miss Bethell was religious in the sense that there is an understanding in her work that every thought expressed in her poetry has at its heart the realisation of God in all things, and all things are in God's creation. Her images of mountains and sea were intimations to her of the mysteries of existence beyond the mere physical appearance. Each natural element used as image in her writing was not for itself alone but as expression of the rhythms and themes of the poems. Her devotional poems, especially those of Day and Night relied heavily upon the imagery of light and dark as expressions of life and death. Her religious searching took in all facets of life and death and she was not afraid to seek to know the worst that pain and death had to offer. In doing so she could learn to face her own death with acceptance, although this acceptance was arrived with a great deal of prayer and meditation and this devotion is present in her poetry.

Each of the three books of verse prepared for publication by Ursula Bethell herself have a linking theme to the poetry. In the Garden volume she is celebrating her home and garden and the pleasant setting she is happy in. The storms which threaten her garden are fleeting, and even the bouts of homesickness triggered by letters from Britain are short-lived. There is a sense of the natural order of things as each inhabitant of the garden and the house is introduced with a

contentment in the small, sometimes mundane, things of life. There is no cloying sentimentality, however, because the poet never loses her wry sense of humour and often turns it against herself. There is a gaiety and freshness in these domestic poems which is not evident in the other two volumes. Time and Place with its themes stated clearly in the title, moves away from the lightheartedness of the garden, looking beyond its confines to the landscape and studying the changes worked by the seasonal progressions upon the colours and moods of the natural features. The 'concrete particulars' as James K. Baxter (2) calls them were for Ursula Bethell more than just features of a landscape she loved, they were expressions of the Holy Spirit and took on universal meanings beyond their physical existence. This is a particular feature of the way the mountains, for example, were used as a symbol of the perpetuity of God and his creation in Day and Night. Time is again an important theme with which she returns to her preoccupations with death and the shortness of Man's life on Earth compared to the eternity of God and his creation. In selecting the contents of each volume, Bethell has deliberately limited her field and chosen poems to fit her theme rather than representative collections which reflect chronological growth in interests and forms of poetry.

It is this lack of obvious chronological progression which makes me look at an assertion by Helen Shaw with some suspicion. She states:

> The further the work receded from the volume 'From a Garden in the Antipodes' the more the poet is felt to be in a state of mystical communion, coldly remote from the breath of humanity. (3)

Miss Bethell chose her verse from the work of the years between 1924 and 1934 and there is little evidence even among her unpublished poems of definite chronological dating. Indeed, according to a letter from H.C.D. Somerset, (4) some of the poems published in Day and Night must have been written concurrently with the Garden poems. It is difficult therefore to select what Miss Shaw calls in the same article her 'late, mature work'. Miss Shaw also claims that there is 'no return to the gay and personal verse of flowers and gardens', yet the surviving fragments of 'By the River Ashley', which was 'undertaken too late and never finished.'(5), have some of the freshness and gaiety of the garden poems and the same concern for the simple things of life. Certainly the subject matter of Day and Night is nearer mystical poetry than are the Garden poems, but it is the humanity of the poet which is bared for our eyes in her deeply personal exploration of 'the dark night of the soul' and it certainly seems to me that Bethell has chained 'the whole universe to the ecstasies/ Of humanity, its anguish and fervour.' (6) albeit the poet herself is humanity's representative.

The poetry of Ursula Bethell continues to pose the questions of Man's relationship with his God and his environment, and her answers to the eternal questions of faith, life and death are intensely personal, yet are set in the universality of the natural environment and thus have meaning for many. Miss Bethell's poetry has greatest appeal when it is simple and uncluttered with convoluted mysticism. Her strength lies in those poems where the natural inspiration and imagery is not overwhelmed by obscure and difficult religious thought.

REFERENCES

Notes to Chapter I.

(1) 'Ursula Bethell as Poet.' in The Student, October 1945, p.3.

(2) 'Weathered Rocks' in Time and Place.

(3) 'Spring on the Plain' in Day and Night.

(4) from Day and Night.

(5) see Landfall, Vol. 2, 1948.

(6) 'Poetry for the Elect.', Evening Star, November 25th, 1939.

(7) in Landfall, 1948.

(8) Bethell Papers, manuscript 38, box 3, University of Canterbury Library.

Notes to Chapter II.

(1) 'Time', lines 3 and 4.

(2) from 'Sinensis'.

(3) N.Z.P.A., London, November 11th, 1929.

(4) in 'Fortune'.

Notes to Chapter III.

(1) in 'Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry' in James K. Baxter as Critic. ed. Fr. Frank McKay, (Auckland, 1978.), p.7.

(2) Joyce Morton. 'The Poetry of Ursula Bethell.', a thesis submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts in English in the Victoria University of Wellington, 1949.

Notes to Chapter IV.

(1) Helen Shaw, 'I am the Dark.' in Arachne 3, December, 1951

(2) Lawrence Baigent, 'The Poetry of Ursula Bethell,' in Landfall, December 1951, p. 27.

(3) William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Proverbs of Hell.'

Notes to Chapter V.

(1) Lawrence Baigent, 'The Poetry of Ursula Bethell.' in Landfall, December 1951, p. 23.

(2) James K. Baxter, 'Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry.' in James K. Baxter as Critic. ed. Fr. Frank McKay, (Auckland, 1978.) p.8.

Notes to Chapter VI.

(1) 'Ursula Bethell as Poet.' in The Student, October, 1945.

(2) 'Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry.' in James K. Baxter as Critic, p. 7.

(3) 'I Am the Dark.' in Arachne 3, December 1951. p. 51.

(4) Bethell Papers, manuscript 38, box 3, in the Canterbury University Library.

(5) Helen Simpson, in the Introduction to the Collected Poems.

(6) 'Weathered Rocks' in Time and Place.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. Works by Ursula Bethell

From a Garden in the Antipodes (London, 1929.)

Time and Place (Christchurch, 1936.)

Day and Night (Christchurch, 1939.)

Collected Poems (Christchurch, 1950.)

B. Unpublished Manuscripts

Ursula Bethell Papers, University of Canterbury Library, Manuscript 38, boxes 1 - 6.

C. Selected Criticism

Lawrence Baigent, 'The Poetry of Ursula Bethell.', Landfall, vol. 5. (1951).

James K. Baxter, 'The Fire and the Anvil.', James K. Baxter as Critic. ed. Fr. Frank McKay. (Auckland, 1978.)

James K. Baxter. 'Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry.', James K. Baxter as Critic. ed. Fr. Frank McKay. (Auckland, 1978.)

Denzil Brown, 'The Religious and the Natural.', The Student,)Sept. 1948.)

H.M. Cocks, 'Ursula Bethell as Friend.', The Student, (October, 1945.)

W. D'Arcy Cresswell, "Whence Cometh our Strength.', Tomorrow 2, (October 14th, 1936.)

Allen Curnow, Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45. (Christchurch, 1945.)

Allen Curnow, The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse. (London, 1960.)

Wystan Curnow, Essays on New Zealand Literature. (London, 1973.)

Basil Dowling, 'Ursula Bethell as Poet.', The Student (October, 1945.)

Robert Erwin, 'Ursula Bethell and Evelyn Hayes: A Misattribution?' Landfall, vol. 31. (1977)

P.A. French, 'Twelve Women Poets of New Zealand: Imperatives of Shape and Growth.', M.A. Thesis, 1967, Austin University, Texas, U.S.A.

S.A. Grave, 'The Image of New Zealand in the Poetry of Ursula Bethell.' Meanjin 3, (1954.)

M.H. Holcroft, Mary Ursula Bethell. (Wellington, 1975.)

M.H. Holcroft, The Waiting Hills. (Christchurch, 1943.)

Landfall, (December, 1948.) "Ursula Bethell, Some Personal Memories.' Contributors: Basil Bowling, H.C.D. Somerset, D'Arcy Cresswell, M.H. Holcroft, John Summers, L.G. Whitehead.

E.H. McCormick, New Zealand Literature, A Survey. (London, 1959)

Joyce M. Morton, 'The Poetry of Ursula Bethell.', M.A. Thesis, 1949, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Vincent O'Sullivan, An Anthology of New Zealand Poetry. 2nd ed. (Wellington, 1976.)

J.C. Reid, Creative Writing in New Zealand: A Brief Critical Survey. (Auckland, 1946.)

Helen Shaw, 'I Am the Dark.' Arachne 3, (December, 1951.)

Peter Simpson, 'Bethell, Mary Ursula.' Great Writers of the English Language: Poets. (London, 1979.)

Kendrick Smithyman, A Way of Saying. (Auckland, 1965.)

T.L. Sturm, 'New Zealand Poetry and the Depression.' Essays on New Zealand Literature, ed. W. Curnow. (London, 1973.)